

Holmes of Kyoto

~Hidden Feelings~



3

Mai Mochizuki

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Mai Mochizuki



Aoi Mashiro

Age 17. She is a second-year high school student who moved to Kyoto from Omiya, Saitama. In an unexpected turn of events, she winds up working part-time at Kura. Now Kiyotaka is teaching her about art and antiques.



Kiyotaka Yagashira

Age 22. He is a first-year graduate student at Kyoto University. Nicknamed “Holmes,” he has an incredibly sharp mind despite his gentle demeanor. His grandfather is the owner of Kura, an antique store in Kyoto’s Teramachi-Sanjo district. Sometimes he acts like your typical mischievous, “wicked” Kyoto boy.



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Prologue: Creeping Feelings

Kyoto's Teramachi-Sanjo district consists of several shopping streets. You might think that the long arcade is one big shopping district, but it actually differs on a street-by-street basis. Starting from Oike Street is the Teramachi Specialist Shops street, and if you keep going down Teramachi Street, it turns into the Sanjo Famous Stores street. Next to that are the Teramachi Kyogoku and Shinkyogoku shopping streets. Farther down is the Nishiki Market, which is known nationwide as "Kyoto's kitchen." It sounds complicated when I describe it like this, and even many Kyoto residents don't have a good grasp on it, let alone tourists. But, the people who come here don't necessarily need to know which street is which. You can stroll through the shopping streets in whichever order comes naturally. The various stores are packed tightly side by side, and you even come across small shrines and temples.

The antique store Kura is nestled within this complicated, maze-like shopping district. Its modest signage fails to catch the eye of many passersby, but if you notice it, you'll find that it emits a mysterious charm. Inside, it's a blend of Japanese and Western aesthetics, with a chandelier, antique sofa, bookshelves, and a lacquered chest of drawers against the wall next to the counter. It feels like a retro-modern cafe. A large grandfather clock goes *tick-tock*, and faint jazz music plays in the background as if matching its rhythm. Various antiques and goods are displayed on the shelves. It always feels like time is stopped in here.

I—Aoi Mashiro, a part-time worker here—was dusting the merchandise as usual while glancing towards the counter, where an attractive young man was holding a hanging scroll and smiling. His name is Kiyotaka Yagashira. He has an exceptional observing eye and a knack for appraisal, and since his surname has the character for "home" in it, he's nicknamed Holmes. He's a grad student, and on top of that, he's the grandson and apprentice of this store's owner, the nationally certified appraiser Seiji Yagashira. Looks-wise, he's a handsome man with a slim build, slightly long bangs, pale skin, and elegant facial features. True to his appearance, he's kind, well-mannered, and graceful. But on the other

hand, he's quite an eccentric, and he's wicked at times. He's stubborn and hates to lose, and he has a bit of an evil side. I was often bewildered by him at first, but after spending eight months with him, I guess I've gotten used to it, since his quirks and two-facedness don't surprise me anymore.

"How is the hanging scroll that Ueda brought in?" I asked, walking to the counter and taking a peek. Ueda was one of our regular customers. Holmes was away when he brought the scroll in, so he left it with me.

"What do you think, Aoi?" Holmes bent the upper portion of the scroll slightly so that I could see it. It was a *bijin-ga*—a painting of a beautiful woman. In other words...

"It's ukiyo-e, right?" I responded. Ukiyo-e is a genre of art that flourished in the Edo period. The name means "pictures of the floating world," and the subject matter ranges from beautiful women and kabuki actors to folk tales and landscapes.

"Correct."

The scroll depicted a woman looking down and holding a smoking pipe. Her sorrowful expression was very beautiful, but it lacked breathtaking impact. If you asked me whether the painting was genuine or not, I'd say no. *But then again, ukiyo-e are mostly woodblock prints...*

Holmes taught me that in Western lithography, genuine works are called "original lithographs." This term applies to prints by the original artist as well as those produced under their supervision or by their workshop. *Does that apply to ukiyo-e too?*

"What's the difference between real and fake ukiyo-e prints? Is it like lithographs, where it depends on if it was the artist who printed them?" I asked.

"Ah," Holmes said, acknowledging my question. "There are two main types of ukiyo-e: hand-painted and woodblock prints. The term 'ukiyo-e' mainly refers to the latter. Hand-painted ukiyo-e are one of a kind, so they're extremely valuable. As for woodblock prints, the process involves an artist who draws the base image, a carver, and a printer, so the image exists in multiple forms."

“So the artists don’t do the carving themselves?”

“Right. Each step is handled by its own specialist.”

“Does that mean that only hand-painted ukiyo-e can be ‘genuine’?”

“For woodblock prints, those that were printed in the Edo period at around the same time that the original block was carved are highly valued. Some people consider those to be ‘genuine.’ Prints made in later periods, even if they were printed from the same original block, are less valuable. It’s important to note that the original blocks deteriorate over time, so there are also many reproductions that were created later.”

“I see,” I murmured, looking down at the scroll again. “Umm, it’s very pretty, but I don’t think it’s genuine.” The facial expression, hair, and lines were all beautiful, but I couldn’t sense any kind of special aura from it.

“Correct. This is an ukiyo-e print by Utamaro. I suspect that it’s a reproduction from the Showa period.”

“You mean *that* Utamaro?”

“Yes, Utamaro Kitagawa.”

I didn’t know much about ukiyo-e, but even I knew that name. Utamaro Kitagawa was a world-renowned ukiyo-e artist, up there with Hokusai and Sharaku.

Holmes looked at the scroll, sighed, and murmured, “I doubt Ueda brought this here thinking that it was authentic and thus valuable...”

“Huh? What makes you think that?”

Before Ueda became a regular customer here, he was close friends with Holmes’s father, who we call “Manager.” Apparently they’ve known each other since university. Ueda has deep bonds with the Yagashira family and is something like a relative to Holmes. That said, he doesn’t seem to have an eye for antiques himself. He’s always bringing things in, going, “I found something great this time, I swear!” only to be disappointed when Holmes declares them fake. *So, I’m pretty sure he brought this in thinking he’d found another amazing treasure...*

“First of all, nowadays, there are barely any hanging scrolls that can be called genuine. My grandfather claims that ninety percent of the hanging scrolls in the world are fake.”

“What? Ninety percent?” That was surprising. *My late grandfather had a large collection of hanging scrolls. If that’s the case, then I guess most of them are fake.* “Why are there so many fakes?”

“It’s not so much that they’re fake, but rather that most of them are reproductions. In Japan, hanging scrolls were once considered an accessible form of interior decoration. Even commoners had alcoves in their homes, so they needed hanging scrolls to display in them. However, the average household wouldn’t be able to afford expensive ones, so they bought copies of famous artists’ work. Since the demand was there, reproductions of popular artists’ paintings were mass-produced. That was the culture back then. Now, when people find hanging scrolls in their storerooms, they get their hopes up thinking that they could be extremely valuable, but that usually isn’t the case.”

I nodded in understanding. “So basically, hanging scrolls were like posters back then, right?”

“Yes, that’s how common they were. There were also many copies made of Hokusai, Sharaku, and Utamaro’s art. This scroll that Ueda brought in is a very ordinary reproduction, so I think he must’ve known. That man loves his ukiyo-e, after all.”

“Oh?” I didn’t know that Ueda liked ukiyo-e.

“I assume that when he came, he didn’t say his usual ‘Ask him how much this’ll be,’ right?”

I folded my arms and thought back.

When Ueda brought this hanging scroll in...

“Huh? Holmes ain’t in?” he asked upon seeing that I was alone in the store.

“No, he’s at school right now.”

“All right then. Tell him to take a look at this.” He took the scroll out of his bag

and placed it on the counter.

“You’re right,” I answered. “Now that I think about it, he didn’t mention price.”

Holmes nodded, his suspicions confirmed. “I don’t think he wanted me to appraise this scroll. I think he simply wanted to show it to me.” He looked down at the Utamaro *bijin-ga* and smiled.

He wanted to show it to Holmes? “Umm, so price aside, is it because he thought it was a beautiful work of art?”

“No, I think he wanted me to guess something from it.”

“So, it contains a message from him?”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

“If you know the title, you might figure it out.”

“What’s the title?”

“It’s called *Deeply Hidden Love*.”

“Hidden love...” I looked at the *bijin-ga* again. The woman was looking down with an anxious expression, as if worrying over secret feelings. *Did Ueda want to tell Holmes that there’s someone who feels this way? In that case...* “Who’s the one who feels like this?”

Is there someone who has these painful feelings towards Holmes? The thought made me anxious. *But why would I be anxious...?*

“It has something to do with my father.”

“Huh?” I squeaked. “The manager?” I hadn’t even considered him.

“My father always hides his relationships from me.”

“Wh-Why?”

“He said before that he ‘doesn’t want to bring romance into the home.’ I’m assuming that he doesn’t want me to perceive things I shouldn’t.”

My face stiffened. *I think I know exactly what he means. With a son this sharp, of course he would be afraid of having his mind read.*

"It would appear that he tells Ueda these things, though."

It must be because they're best friends. He can talk to Ueda about the things he can't tell his son.

"I suspect that my father's girlfriend is considering marriage, but my father isn't interested, so she's anxious."

"So this scroll represents the woman that the manager is dating?"

"I believe so."

"Why would Ueda send you such an obscure message?"

"He probably promised my father that he wouldn't tell me. This way, he hasn't broken his promise."

"I see. That's smart." I giggled. *Since Ueda didn't say it out loud, it's fine. It's true that this way, he can say, "I just wanted to show him a hanging scroll."*

"I imagine he's trying to say: 'The reason he ain't getting remarried is 'cos he's concerned about you. So go give him a lift.'"

"I see. So, are you going to give him a lift?" I leaned in excitedly.

"I won't."

"Huh? Why not? You should!"

"He doesn't need me to drive him. He has his own ways of getting around." Holmes placed his hand on his chin and chuckled. "Sorry about that. Anyway, my father isn't being considerate of me in that way."

"R-Really?"

"If I was still a child, then that would make sense, but I'm already a grown adult. Would he really care about something like that?"

"Oh, you're right. Why isn't he remarrying, then?"

"He's been unmarried for a long time now, so I think he finds it more comfortable this way. He wouldn't want to get married again after all this

time,” Holmes said plainly, carefully rolling up the scroll.

“Oh,” I replied, picking up the feather duster again to resume my cleaning. I looked around the store and my eyes settled on a large piece of calligraphy hanging on the wall. This wasn’t the work of a famous artist—it was written by this store’s owner and Holmes’s grandfather, Seiji Yagashira. Calligraphy was his hobby, and sometimes he’d write things on a whim and display them here. That said, calling it a “hobby” didn’t do it justice. The writing was beautifully delicate and smooth—fitting of one of the world’s best connoisseurs. Still, I was surprised that that loud and hearty man could write like this. *Maybe he’s actually a careful and considerate person on the inside.*

The calligraphy was a classic poem: “*I hid my love, but not well enough, for others even asked, ‘Art thou pining for something?’*” —Taira no Kanemori’s famous verse.

I stared at the poem and then turned to look at Holmes. “Since the previous poem was fall-themed, I thought the next one would be a winter poem, but it’s Taira no Kanemori’s, huh?”

“Yes, the other day, he suddenly came in and put that up. I don’t know what he was thinking,” he replied in a cold, blunt tone, not bothering to look up from the accounting book. For some reason, he didn’t seem too receptive to the poem.

“This poem was composed at one of the Heian period’s poetry contests, right?”

“Yes, to be specific, it was the Tentoku Imperial Poetry Contest. I’m impressed that you knew.”

“I don’t know well enough to be worth complimenting. I think I came across it in a book before, that’s all. I didn’t even remember the name of the contest.” I shrugged sheepishly.

Holmes smiled and said, “In the fourth year of the Tentoku era, Emperor Murakami held a poetry contest. In the final, twentieth match, Mibu no Tadami recited the poem, ‘*They already whisper my name, though my love hath only begun.*’”

“What does that mean?”

“In modern language, it would be along the lines of ‘There are already rumors circulating that I’m in love, even though my secret crush has only just begun.’”

“Oh, that’s lovely.” His modern, direct interpretation of a young man from the Heian period in love tugged at my heartstrings. *I guess people’s hearts are the same in every era.*

“Taira no Kanemori recited this poem in response.” Holmes looked up at the calligraphy on the wall, and I followed suit.

“I hid my love, but not well enough, for others even asked, ‘Art thou pining for something?’”

This one was a love poem as well. Even I could read between the lines here—in Mibu no Tadami’s poem, though the narrator was hiding his crush, there was a sense of joy and happiness. In the one on the wall, in contrast, you could sense the sorrow and passion hidden in the author’s heart.

“The presented poems were both too magnificent, and a winner could not be decided. Then, the emperor murmured, ‘I hid my love...’ and Taira no Kanemori was named the victor.”

“It was a close match, huh?”

“Indeed. According to one theory, Mibu no Tadami died in agony after his loss.”

“Wh-What? He was so upset that he died?”

“I don’t know how credible the claim is, but it conveys the fact that it was that frustrating for him.”

“Both of the poems were wonderful... Don’t you think it’s cruel to rank them? Wouldn’t it depend a lot on the judge’s taste?”

“I agree, but at the same time, this applies to art in every generation. People judge art based on their personal tastes, and the resulting frustration and rivalry produce even better works.”

“Oh, that does make sense.” *It sounds like it’d be ideal if there were no rankings and everyone’s art was considered good, but then people might stop*

there and not try to improve. Competition produces wonderful works. “But why did the owner suddenly put up this poem?”

“Who knows? He’s a whimsical man, so it likely means nothing,” Holmes answered flippantly, looking back down at the accounting book.

It means nothing? Really? Holmes and the owner both have their mysterious side, so it’s hard for me to believe that it doesn’t mean anything. The previous poem here was by Fujiwara no Akisuke, Master of the Western Capital. It went, “*Clouds stretching in the autumn wind, through their gaps the moon’s light shines clear.*” When the owner put it on display, he said, “This is a fall poem that means, ‘The autumn wind blows, and the moonlight streaming through the gaps in the clouds is beautifully clear.’ It came to mind when I was enchanted by the autumn night.” *I wonder if it was something similar this time.*

“I wonder if the owner encountered something that reminded him of this Taira no Kanemori poem.”

“Perhaps... It’s incredibly annoying though, so I’m going to take it down,” Holmes said coldly.

I blinked, surprised. “Wh-Why is it annoying?”

He paused. “It just is.” He averted his eyes, his expression blank.

What’s wrong? I tilted my head.

The door chime rang. I was about to shout “Welcome!” but closed my mouth when I saw who it was. *Speak of the devil—it’s the manager.* He was stylishly dressed for the winter, wearing a Burberry coat and a scarf.

“Welcome back, Dad. Aoi, I’m going to school now, so please watch the store with my father.” Holmes closed the accounting book and stood up. Apparently the manager was going to take his place.

“Oh, okay.”

The manager wordlessly hung his coat and scarf on the coat hanger, shakily made his way to the counter, and sank down onto a chair. He had a gloomy look on his face.

“M-Manager? Are you okay?” I asked.

“Did something happen, Dad?” Holmes asked at the same time.

The manager sighed deeply. “I have to rewrite my entire manuscript,” he grumbled, looking down with his hand on his forehead. *The manager is an author. He mainly writes historical novels, and his work is quite popular.*

“Are you talking about the request you received to write a historical romance novel?” Holmes asked. I’d heard about it too. Apparently, historical novels with romance at the forefront were doing well right now. Bookstores were filled with new romantic interpretations of Princess Kazu, Yoshitsune and Gozen Shizuka, and *The Tales of Ise*. The manager had also received such a request from his publisher, and I’d seen him writing away at this very counter.

“Yes... It wasn’t a unique idea, but I tried my best to write about Nobunaga and Lady Noh from a new perspective...”

Holmes and I exchanged glances, immediately realizing what the problem was. Just the other day, another popular author had released a historical novel called *Nobunaga and His Mistresses*. It was an interesting, fresh take, and it instantly became a bestseller.

The manager continued to hold his head in his hands. “Everyone’s already written about every dramatic event in history. There’s nothing left to write about. I can’t think of anything. I’m all out of ideas... I’m a talentless hack,” he muttered.

“M-Manager...”

The manager wasn’t a particularly optimistic person, but he was always cheerful. I’d never seen him so depressed before. I fidgeted, unable to hide my unease. Even though he’d been making good progress on his manuscript, now that *Nobunaga and His Mistresses* was out, he had to scrap it and start anew. I didn’t know what it was like to be an author, but I could imagine how much of a problem this must be.

“U-Um, I really enjoyed the short story you wrote before, about *The Tale of Genji*. The one that focused on the failed love between Lady Fujitsubo and Hikaru.” *Maybe he could write a full-length version of that?*

“I appreciate the sentiment, but there’s already another author writing about

The Tale of Genji for the same publisher. Fortune has forsaken me,” the manager mumbled in a low voice, still looking down. I was taken aback by his pessimism.

Holmes came up beside me and whispered in my ear, “At times like this, my father will interpret everything negatively, so it’s best to leave him alone. Don’t worry about him.”

“O-Oh.” *Even if he tells me not to worry, I can’t help it.* I restlessly peeked at the manager, who was still hunched over.

“He’ll be fine. Well, keep an eye on him.” Holmes held his index finger to his mouth and smiled. Even in a situation like this, his form was still as captivating as ever.

“O-Okay.”

“I’m going to take a page out of Ueda’s book.”

“Huh?”

Holmes disappeared farther into the store and came back with a new hanging scroll. “Dad, when you’re at a roadblock, it’s best to look at art. Please calm your heart with this painting. It’ll heal you.” He gently placed the rolled-up scroll on the counter.

The manager silently looked down at it.

“If time permits, I would recommend going to Kamakura for a diversion,” Holmes continued with a gentle smile. “You don’t have to worry about the store.”

“Kamakura? That’s sudden.”

“It’d be nice to see temples and shrines outside of Kyoto for a change of pace.” Holmes looked at the grandfather clock and straightened his back. “Ah, I need to get going. Aoi, it’s in your hands now.”

“Okay, bye.” I bowed.

Holmes bowed back, put on his coat, and left. The door chime echoed through the store.

“Art, huh...?” The manager sighed listlessly and took a pair of gloves out of his pocket. He unrolled the scroll with an unenthusiastic look on his face. He seemed like he was only doing it because his son asked him to. Meanwhile, I was extremely curious to find out what kind of scroll Holmes had chosen.

“Wow!” The hanging scroll depicted the Buddhist Kannon, or Guan Yin, in a standing pose. She had a shining halo and held a flower in her left hand. Her right hand was extended in an offering of aid. Her gentle features were brimming with affection, and the colors were soft. She looked very divine. I felt like I could understand why Holmes had brought this scroll over. “This is definitely soothing...”

“Yes, it’s a beautiful Holy Kannon.”

“Holy Kannon?”

“Did you know that the bodhisattva Kannon is multi-faced and multi-armed, with many forms?”

“Oh, yes. It has lots of faces and arms, right?”

“Non-superhuman depictions, with only one face and two arms, are called ‘Holy Kannon.’”

“I see.” *I guess the manager is knowledgeable about these things too.*

“But why did Kiyotaka show me this?” The manager crossed his arms, furrowing his brow.

“Huh? Because it’s soothing, right?”

“No, think about who we’re talking about. There must be some meaning behind it.”

“Oh.” I nodded firmly. Holmes himself had said that he was going to take a page out of Ueda’s book. So, this hanging scroll contained a message from him.

“Kamakura, huh...?” The manager murmured. “That was certainly sudden.” He must’ve been thinking about Holmes’s comment about going to Kamakura.

“Do you like Kamakura?”

“I do, but it’s not somewhere I’d go every time I get writer’s block.”

“So, maybe there’s a hint that has to do with Kannon and Kamakura?”

“Right. He also said to visit temples and shrines outside of Kyoto, so he must be referring to a temple in Kamakura that worships Kannon. This is a problem.”

“How come?”

“There are at least thirty-three temples in Kamakura that enshrine Kannon. It’s called the Kamakura Thirty-Three Kannon Pilgrimage.”

“Oh, so there are a lot. Which ones have a deep connection to her?”

“Let’s see...” The manager retrieved a book from the shelf. “Kosoku-ji, Jomyo-ji, Hokoku-ji, Enmei-ji... Ah, there are fifteen in total.”

“Fifteen? That’s still a lot.” I peered at the book as well.

“Come to think of it...” The manager took another book from the shelf and quickly flipped through it. He stopped at a page with a picture of a wooden Holy Kannon statue. “I knew it,” he said.

“Did you figure something out?”

“Yes. This goes back to the Sengoku period—there was once a nunnery in Kamakura called Taihei-ji Temple. It had an incident where a military commander took away the Holy Kannon statue that was enshrined there.” The manager nodded as he read the text.

“Huh? It was stolen?”

“Well, since it was the warring era, it wasn’t exactly ‘stealing.’ When the Boso commander Yoshihiro Satomi attacked Kamakura, he took Taihei-ji’s Holy Kannon statue as well as their head nun, Shogaku.”

“Wh-What? He even took a nun?” I couldn’t believe it! My eyes widened.

The manager smiled in amusement. “I’m sure that to him, the nun was the treasure he desired the most.”

“So...that commander was in love with her?”

“Yes. Interestingly enough, that nun was the daughter of Yoshiaki Ashikaga, and Yoshihiro Satomi’s childhood friend.”

“Really?!”

“Yes. There isn’t much literature about it, but it’s speculated that those childhood friends may have been in love with each other. After all, he even made her his legal wife. His many years’ worth of feelings were fulfilled...”

“Wow...” I covered my mouth with my hand, surprised by the unexpected romance. A daughter who became a nun due to various circumstances, and a commander who took her away by force. To think that they were childhood friends who’d loved each other all along... “It’s so dramatic.”

“It really is.”

“This is my first time hearing about this. Is it a famous story?”

“No, it wasn’t a major event in history. I assume there are many people who don’t know it.” The manager stopped nodding and looked at me. I returned his gaze, not saying anything. Even without exchanging words, we both knew what the other wanted to say. *This was Holmes’s message.*

“I see,” said the manager. “Using these two... That could be interesting.” He chuckled. I was relieved that he’d returned to his usual self. “Kiyotaka always has the answer, huh?”

“Yes, but I feel like he could’ve just told you instead of using this roundabout method.”

“That boy respects me as an author, so he won’t give me obvious advice. Besides, doing it this way made my mind switch gears.”

“You have a point.” Before, the manager wasn’t able to accept verbal advice anyway. Turning it into a small riddle made the manager change gears and think outside the box. Holmes was able to casually drop a big hint without hurting his father’s pride. *He’s amazing.*

The manager smiled as he looked at the scroll.

“I want to be helpful too, so I’ll make coffee,” I said.

“Thank you.”

I went into the kitchenette and started preparing the coffee. I saw Ueda’s hanging scroll on a shelf in the back and suddenly remembered what we’d been talking about earlier. Holmes had said that the manager didn’t want to remarry,

but was that truly the case? *I think it'd be good for him if he had a loved one to help him when he gets anxious at a roadblock like that.*

"Here you go," I said, placing his cup on the counter.

"Thank you." The manager happily lifted the cup to his mouth.

"Um, do you ever think about getting married again?" I asked.

The manager choked on his coffee, surprised by my sudden question.

"Oh, sorry, that was rude of me."

"No, not at all. Did Kiyotaka say something to you?" He wiped his mouth with a handkerchief and then looked at me with a very gentle look in his eyes.

"Huh? Oh, no, um..." I couldn't think of a good excuse, and my eyes darted around frantically.

The manager chuckled at me. "Actually, I received a marriage meeting request through Ueda. He said there was a lovely lady who's a fan of mine, and I met her without her knowing that was a matchmaking meeting."

"I see." *So it was a marriage meeting.*

"After meeting her, I did think she was lovely, but I declined. Ueda seemed to think that I was being considerate of Kiyotaka, but..."

I nodded as I listened to his story. *I wonder if Ueda brought that scroll in, thinking, "How could he turn down such a good opportunity? What a waste!"*

"But that wasn't the reason, right?" I asked.

"Yes. I was concerned about the woman, not Kiyotaka."

"Her?" *I wonder why?*

The manager smiled self-deprecatingly. "I...still can't forget my late wife," he murmured.

I didn't say anything in response. The manager's wife had passed away when Holmes was two years old. That was twenty years ago.

After a moment of silence, he continued quietly, "Because she was unfair."

"Unfair?" I looked at him, confused.

“Yes, she was an unfair person.” He nodded and cast his eyes down. “At the height of her beauty, when I loved her the most, she suddenly disappeared. It was like watching a beautiful flower die in an instant. In my heart, I can only remember her as my beloved wife, the most beautiful woman in the world. How could I ever forget her? No matter how many times I tried to love again, no one could win against her. I could never remarry. It’d be disrespectful to the bride when I can’t love her more than my wife.” He smiled, and in that smile was an intense mixture of affection and sorrow.

“Manager...” My eyes welled up.

“Now then, it’s time to pull myself together and get to work. Kiyotaka gave me an idea, after all.”

“O-Okay. Good luck.”

The manager nodded and took a new set of manuscript paper out of his bag. His favorite pen went *scritch, scratch*, echoing through the store as he wrote fervently, as though his depressed episode had never happened.

I’m sure I’ll be able to read his historical love drama in the near future. The fleeting first love between childhood friends, the young commander drawn into conflict, the sorrow of the girl who becomes a nun... At last, the commander steels himself to steal her away. To think that something so dramatic really happened...

“Love is amazing...” I whispered. Not just in history, but the manager too, who was able to say with confidence that he still loves his wife now, twenty years after her passing. *Being held captive by such strong feelings... Love is like a curse sometimes.* I felt apprehensive, yet the slightest bit envious.

I turned away to hide the tears welling up in my eyes, and saw the owner’s calligraphy.

“I hid my love, but not well enough, for others even asked, ‘Art thou pining for something?’”

Taira no Kanemori’s poem...was a heartrending love poem: “I hid these

feelings in my heart so that others wouldn't find out, but apparently, they're finally showing on my face. People now ask me, 'Are you pining for something?'"

Kura began winter with this verse of inconcealable feelings. Holmes and I would later find ourselves pulled into various incidents and events related to hidden feelings...but that's a story for later.

Chapter 1: A Kabuki Star's Love

1

It's now mid-November. Before I knew it, autumn's presence had weakened and signs of winter had come. The beautiful fall foliage scattered away, and the wind was getting chillier and chillier. The penetrating cold that Kyoto is known for is growing stronger with each passing day.

The tourists passing through the shopping district were in winter outfits, wearing coats, hats, and scarves. That said, Kura was kept warm and toasty by an antique oil heater, so I couldn't feel the outside coldness at all.

When I first came to Teramachi-Sanjo's antique store, Kura, it was early spring, when it was still chilly. *It's almost winter already... The seasons change so quickly.* I turned away from the window and looked at Holmes, who was holding a binder and checking the inventory. He gently touched each item one by one with a serious, dignified face. His slim form was as elegant as ever.

Lately, I keep remembering that time when we were leaving Genko-an Temple after his face-off with Ensho. Holmes reaching out and holding my right hand, me looking up in surprise and seeing him gazing straight at me, the heat coming from his hand... "Aoi, I..." he began, squeezing my hand tighter. I anxiously awaited his next words, but Akihito just *had* to interrupt him by shouting, "What's taking you guys so long?!" Then Holmes let go of my hand, ran his hand through his bangs, and said, "Sorry, I'll tell you later, when we have more time. Particularly when Akihito isn't around." *It's been about a month since then, and he's never brought it up. He acts the same as usual, as if nothing happened. When is "later" going to be?*

Holding the feather duster, I glared at Holmes's back.

"Is something the matter?" he asked, turning around as if he'd sensed my eyes on him.

Surprised, I clammed up. "Oh, um... Well, before..."

“Yes?”

“When we were at Genko-an, you said you’d tell me something later...” I fidgeted.

“Oh...” He looked away and placed his hands on his hips, seeming troubled. It was as if he hadn’t wanted to be asked. “You’re right. Well...”

“Y-Yes?”

“I want...to do something to thank you.”

“Huh?”

“You encouraged me, and you’re always helping me.”

“It’s nothing, really.” *Is that all it was?* I slumped, not knowing what I was expecting. *But in that case, does that mean he was going to say, “Aoi, I want to do something to thank you”? I don’t think that’s something he’d have to hold off on saying.* His answer didn’t quite sit well with me.

The door chime rang.

“Welcome!” I greeted, looking towards the door, where a middle-aged woman was gasping for breath.

“Tomorrow’s the big day, dear Kiyotaka!” Her eyes were glimmering. It was Mieko, who is an old friend of the owner’s and runs her own clothing store in this shopping district.

“Yes, I’m aware,” Holmes said, smiling gently at her.

“It’s already tomorrow—how time flies.”

“It certainly does.”

I looked at the tabletop calendar. Tomorrow was November 15th. *What’s on that day?*

“Um, is something happening tomorrow?” I asked hesitantly.

Mieko whirled around to face me. “Why, tomorrow is the day that tickets go on sale for the Kaomise!”

Kaomise? What’s that? I was confused for a moment before I remembered

seeing the word in the news lately.

“Are you going to a kabuki show?” I asked, intimidated by Mieko’s intensity.

“Yes!” She nodded. “The Kaomise is very important to the people of Kyoto.”

“Oh...” I knew that the Kaomise was a kabuki show, but that was the extent of my knowledge. I had a vague impression of actors standing in a line and bowing. I didn’t know it was special in Kyoto.

“Aoi, the Kaomise is a showcase of the actors,” Holmes immediately began explaining as usual, probably having sensed my confusion. “In the world of kabuki, there’s an annual ‘name succession’ where stage names are passed down to the next generation. After the succession, in December, the Kaomise is held as the first show with the new cast. To the people of Kyoto, it’s a major event that symbolizes winter.”

“So basically, in December, the new members have their first show?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I would’ve thought they’d do that at the start of the year.”

“In the Edo period, theater actors’ contracts were from November to October of the following year. Since the cast changed in November, December was when the theaters presented the entire new roster. So, it became tradition to hold the Kaomise in December.”

I nodded. Holmes’s explanations were always so easy to understand.

“Make a mental note of this, dear Aoi,” said Mieko. “At the end of the year, the people of Kyoto indulge in watching the Kaomise to show appreciation for the year that has passed and motivate themselves to work hard next year.”

“I see... And the tickets go on sale tomorrow?”

“Yes, yes. They sell out in the blink of an eye, so I always ask dear Kiyotaka to help me. Computers simply aren’t my strong suit. What would I do without him?” Mieko smiled happily at Holmes.

“Really? That’s nice of you, Holmes.”

“I’m buying a ticket for myself too, so I just pick up another one afterwards.”

“Afterwards?” I giggled at how easily he admitted that it was a secondary priority.

“It’s still a great help,” Mieko said. “Here, eat these. I just returned from visiting Sagano with a friend.” She hurriedly placed a paper bag on the counter. “That was all I wanted to confirm with you, so I must go now. I’m counting on you, dear.” She quickly left the store.

Mieko really is energetic. I used to think that Kyoto women would be mellower, but in the end, it depends on the person. Maybe it’s also different because she runs a business.

“What did Mieko give us? She mentioned Sagano.”

“Let’s see,” Holmes said, picking up the paper bag and looking inside. “Ah, it’s an assortment of tofu from Morika. This is a treat.” He sounded genuinely happy.

“Is Morika’s tofu good?”

“Yes, it’s an old specialty store in Sagano, which is near Arashiyama. They’re famous for handmaking each piece one by one. Their tofu is supple, smooth, and delicious. Their fried tofu is also great. Looks like we’re having boiled tofu tonight.” He took out the plastic bag filled with fresh-looking tofu and put it in the fridge in the kitchenette.

“I didn’t know there was such a good tofu maker in Sagano.”

“It was founded in the Ansei era and was supposedly popular with many restaurants and temples, including Tenryu-ji Temple. Mieko brought plenty, so I’ll share some with you. The fried tofu tastes best when you heat it up a bit in the toaster oven and then eat it with soy sauce.”

“Wow, I’m excited to try it! Thank you.”

“It’s been a while for me, so I’m excited too. I’ll have to thank Mieko.”

Seeing him look so happy, I was impressed that Mieko knew what he’d like. *They’ve known each other a long time, after all.*

“As for the ‘thanks’ we were talking about earlier...” Holmes began, suddenly returning to our previous conversation.

Surprised, I looked up. “Y-Yes?”

“Actually, I wanted to go see the Kaomise with you.”

“Like, the kabuki show?”

“Yes. Back when Kajiware gave me tickets for another kabuki show, I said I would bring you, but I ended up too busy to go myself. It’s been weighing on my mind ever since.”

“Oh right.” I nodded, remembering what happened in the summer. It was early July, and we’d gone to a mountain lodge in Kurama. After Holmes solved the Kajiware family’s dispute, he received kabuki tickets as thanks. Back then, he said we’d go together, but the tickets were for an August show and Holmes spent all of August overseas with the owner. *I think he ended up giving the tickets to Ueda and the manager.* I’d forgotten all about it, so I felt bad that Holmes had been bothered by it.

“You don’t have to worry about that at all,” I reassured him. “Kabuki tickets are expensive. I’m just a high school girl who doesn’t know how to appreciate it, so even if I went, it’d be wasted on me.”

“Aoi, I believe that traditional performance art is part of fine art. I think it’d be a great experience for you, so please think of it as studying.”

“O-Okay...”

“And most of all, please let me do this as a token of my gratitude.”

I didn’t recall doing anything deserving of thanks to begin with. *If anything, Holmes is constantly helping me, so I feel like I should be doing something for him instead...*

I nodded hesitantly.

“Consider it a winter bonus to your training at Kura,” Holmes continued.

I was startled again. *Why is he so insistent about that? What if, despite everything he says about thanking me, he’s more interested in teaching me about traditional performance art? Knowing Holmes...it could be true. As my teacher, he might be thinking about giving me a good learning experience in addition to his regret over not keeping his promise last time. If that’s the case, I*

should be grateful for the opportunity. Getting to see a kabuki show is a rare experience... But unfortunately, it's hard for me to leave the house right now unless it's for work.

"This kabuki show is at night, right?"

"There's also a daytime session."

"Oh, I see. That might work..."

"You're not inclined to go at night?"

"To be honest, I did badly on the last round of tests. My parents said that if I don't do well on the next one, I'll have to quit this job and go to cram school. So I'm trying my best to study, and it's kind of hard to go out at night," I said, fidgeting awkwardly.

Holmes blinked in surprise before immediately looking down. "I see. I'm very sorry."

"Huh?" *Why is he apologizing?*

"Your grades dropped because you were working here. That's a grave issue."

"No, it's not because of work..." I'd simply been slacking off. It had nothing to do with work.

"But you were told that you'd have to quit your job if your grades continued to suffer, right?"

"Y-Yes."

"That's a problem for us too. Besides, we asked you to come in before your tests, so I think it's partially our fault. I'd like to take responsibility."

"R-Responsibility?"

"Please take a seat, Aoi. Starting today, use your free time here to study. I'll check your work."

"Wh-What?"

"Then, we'll go to the Kaomise. I promise your grades will improve." He placed his hand on his chest with a determined look in his eyes.

I blushed. “O-Okay. Thanks for your help.” I bowed.

Then, the door chime rang for a second time that day.

Is it a customer? I turned around, and this time there was a group of female university students.

“Oh, he’s really here!”

“We came to hang out, Holmes!”

They came inside, smiling cheerfully.

“Huh, you came all this way?” Holmes walked over to them, looking happy.

“Mmhm, we came to admire your face.”

“Just kidding! We’re actually headed for the Sanjo cinema.”

“That’s nice. I get the urge to see a movie sometimes too.”

“Wanna come with?”

“I can’t go so suddenly. Could you invite me in advance next time?”

“We will! It’s a date. Speaking of which, are you going to our seminar’s drinking party?”

“I have to, or else the professor will say nasty things about me.”

“Hah, yeah!”

I watched the merry group from a distance and sighed softly.

2

“You’re so lucky! Not everyone gets to have a Kyoto U grad student for a tutor,” my friend said, leaning against the wall. It was a break between classes at school, and we were chatting in the hallway by a window as usual. Her name is Kaori Miyashita. Her family owns a long-standing store called Miyashita Kimono Fabrics, and I’d gotten to know her through the Saio-dai incident. She’s usually calm and collected, as you’d expect from her intellectual appearance, but she also has a cute fangirly side.

“He’s a nice guy, so I’m sure he’s great at teaching,” she continued.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “He’s nice, and he *is* a good teacher, but...”

At first, Holmes had taught me nicely, like Kaori said. But before long...

“No. Before the exams, you must factor in both overcoming your weaknesses to prevent grade loss as well as securing more points. Taking a test is the same as running a business—you must achieve profit in this paper-based marketplace!”

...he was teaching me the rules of business instead.

“My apologies. Tests are a matter of how aggressively you can score points. Please keep that in mind.”

Looking at his sharp, serious expression, I realized that he really was a skilled merchant. *Despite how laid-back he is at the store, he must be generating profit.* It gave me the shivers.

Since I had such a crafty test-taker checking my work, I felt like the next tests would go all right. I wouldn’t have to feel bad about going to the Kaomise either. Despite my initial hesitation, I was really looking forward to it, since Holmes insisted on it so strongly. I didn’t know that the people of Kyoto considered the Kaomise a symbol of winter and motivation for the entire year. *Past or present, Kyoto people really are refined...*

After hearing my story, Kaori gave me an exasperated look. “Don’t get the wrong idea, Aoi.”

“Huh?”

“These days, the people who make the Kaomise the highlight of their year are the minority.”

“Really? Not everyone goes?”

“Definitely not every year. People like my parents and Holmes’s family have been doing business for a long time, so they figure ‘If we don’t go, then who will?’ But normal people don’t really go.”

“R-Right, that makes sense.” *I’m glad she corrected my misunderstanding before it became a problem.* “Have you gone before, Kaori?”

“Yeah, they took me last year for ‘future reference.’ I can kinda see how

people would get addicted to it after seeing it once,” she answered, folding her arms.

“I see.”

“This year’s Kaomise seems like it’ll be exciting. Kisuke Ichikata’s the leading star, right?”

“Oh!” I clapped my hands. Kisuke Ichikata is a handsome actor with gentle features from the prestigious Ichikata family. He also acted in TV dramas, and he was the subject of many scandals involving women. You could consider him a popular celebrity. *By the way, there’s a rumor going around right now about him and a model.* “I’m really excited to be able to see him!” I giggled.

“Must be nice,” Kaori murmured, looking up at the ceiling. “Holmes is really different from the rest of us, though. Going to the Kaomise on a date? Wow.”

“It’s not a date.”

“Sure, but he wouldn’t take a girl he wasn’t interested in. Do you know how much those tickets cost? How’re things going between you two?”

I shrugged. “To be honest, I thought there might be a chance, but it seems like I was wrong.”

“What?”

“Well, apparently this came about because he felt bad for not keeping his promise in the summer. He also seems to want to give me a good educational experience as my teacher... And most of all, I think I was misunderstanding.” I felt my strength leaving me as I spoke.

“Misunderstanding?” Kaori came a bit closer. She had a serious look on her face.

“Holmes is always really nice and gentlemanly to me, so I thought I might be special to him, but apparently not. I realized that he’s like that to all girls.”

“What happened to make you think that?”

“The other day, a bunch of his female friends from university came to the store to see him. He was like, ‘Huh, you came all this way?’ and talked to them in a casual, friendly Kyoto accent. Watching him made me realize that even with

other people, he's always nice and gentlemanly with a bit of wickedness at times... I'm not special or anything. In the end, I'm just a part-timer..." *I'm the same as everyone else... No, I'm even farther from him than the other girls. He always uses formal language with me.*

"Feeling heartbroken?" Kaori peered into my face, seeming concerned.

"No way," I said, shaking my head. "It's not that extreme. I think it's good that I found out the truth before my misunderstanding got out of hand. Now that I think about it, despite his weird aspects, Holmes is a great person, so a boring person like me wouldn't be a good match for him. Well, even if I'm drawing the line here, I think it's still okay to admire him from a distance, like a fan." Even I could tell that I started talking faster as I went on. I really did think it was a good thing that I learned the truth before I got too excited, though. *I've had enough of painful romance. Most importantly, spending time in Kura heals my heart, so I don't want to lose that place.*

3

Two weeks have passed. It's now late November, and the old city of Kyoto is adorned with Christmas decorations. Festive music is playing too. Even at Kura, we set up a majestic tree inside, and the background music was changed to jazz versions of Christmas songs.

"It feels a bit strange to celebrate Christmas in Kyoto," I said, giggling and looking at the sparkling ornaments on the tree.

"Does it?" Holmes looked at me.

"Yes. This is a city of temples and shrines, after all."

"Kyoto has many churches as well."

"Oh!" My eyes widened. "You're right." Come to think of it, Kyoto was packed with shrines, temples, and churches alike. It was a wonder that the Shinto gods, Buddhas, and foreign deities never fought.

"Japan is fundamentally free with its faith, or rather, it's a country of countless gods. Even foreign gods are welcome here," Holmes said as if reading my mind.

“I see. Now that I think about it, Buddhism came from a foreign country too, right?”

“Yes. Japan’s gods are very open-minded.”

“They really are.” I giggled. Looking outside, I caught a glimpse of a young man walking quickly towards the store. *Huh? Is that...?* Thinking he looked familiar, I turned around and the door flung open.

“Yo, long time no see! Here I am, Holmes!” It was Akihito, barging into the store with a smile.

“What? No one asked you to come.” Holmes shrugged, exasperated.

“Don’t be like that. You wanted to see me, right, pal?!” Akihito plopped himself down onto a chair, grinning broadly.

“I’m not as generous as the gods, so this is mildly annoying.” Holmes sighed.

“Huh? Gods?” Akihito tilted his head, and I laughed in response. “Anyway, man, you’re so cold, even when we haven’t seen each other in a while.”

“It *has* been a while. It seems like you’ve gotten more work in Tokyo again, so I assumed you were busy.”

I nodded in agreement. “I’ve been seeing you on TV more often.”

“That prank show was good.” Holmes chuckled.

Right, the footage that had secretly been filmed at Akihito’s aunt’s house had finally aired on TV. Viewers at home were shocked to see the “true form” of Akihito, who had been presenting the city of Kyoto in a perfect, refined manner. Meanwhile, Akihito bragged that he’d been acting to fit the program, leading people to believe that he was an amazing actor. As a result of his soaring ratings, he’s been appearing on TV more often. *If this was his manager’s plan all along, then that’s incredible.*

“I’m actually still on the clock,” Akihito said.

“What?” Holmes and I looked at him blankly.

“We’re filming a travel show in Kyoto right now, but they ran into some technical difficulties so the actors are on break. I think the others are gonna

come here too.”

I looked out the window and the door opened at the same time. A handsome man stood there.

I froze upon recognizing the celebrity. “What?” *This is Kisuke Ichikata, right? The kabuki actor that everyone’s talking about?* Before the realization could fully sink in, I saw the actress Rei Asamiya behind him. She was a star who formerly played male roles in the Takarazuka Revue, an all-female musical theater troupe. She was so stunningly beautiful that I could’ve sworn there were roses in the background behind her. She bowed and came inside.

“Kisuke, Rei, you made it! This is my best friend’s shop.” Akihito grinned and waved at them without getting up from his chair.

I was still frozen in place, unable to process the big-name celebrities who had suddenly appeared in our little store.

“Best friend?” Holmes froze for a different reason.

“Huh, is this an antique store?” Kisuke asked.

“It’s like an old-fashioned cafe. How nice!” Rei remarked. They both looked curiously around the store.

O-Oh my gosh! This is the most glamorous Kura’s ever been. I wish Kaori could see this!

“Welcome,” Holmes greeted them, smiling and bowing as usual. Unlike me, he seemed unfazed.

“Oh, are you Seiji Yagashira’s grandson?” Kisuke asked. “Nice to meet you. My name is Kisuke Ichikata.” He bowed deeply after his dignified introduction. He had gentle facial features but intense eyes and exuded the aura of an actor.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Kiyotaka Yagashira. You know my grandfather?” Holmes smiled elegantly, not overwhelmed by the actor’s presence.

“Yes, of course. I’ve met him several times in Minamiza’s dressing rooms and the geisha districts,” Kisuke answered with a smile. *So the owner’s connections extend this far...*

“I was on a Kansai program with him before too,” Rei said. “I’m surprised his

grandson is so good-looking.” She leaned in. “Hey, are you interested in showbiz? I think you’d be popular. If you’re interested, I’ll put in a good word for you.”

“Don’t bother, Rei! This guy ain’t interested in that stuff at all,” Akihito answered immediately, putting his arm around Holmes’s shoulders and pulling him close.

“Yes, I’m honored that you feel that way, but I don’t think I’m suitable for that world,” Holmes said smoothly. “Akihito, your arm is heavy.” He brushed Akihito’s arm away as if he was getting rid of dust.

“Would it kill you to be nice for once, Holmes?” Akihito pouted.

“Holmes?” Kisuke and Rei tilted their heads.

“Oh, this guy’s a ridiculously good appraiser despite his age, and he’s also a genius. We call him Holmes because of all the tough mysteries he’s solved.”

“Akihito, please stop exaggerating. I don’t recall ever solving a tough mystery.” Holmes sighed, exasperated. “It’s just a nickname. People call me Holmes because my surname has the character for ‘home’ in it.” He put his hand on his chest and smiled. *There it is—his catchphrase.*

“What? You’ve solved tons of mysteries!” Akihito exclaimed.

Holmes smiled wryly and shrugged. “I wouldn’t call them ‘tough’ mysteries.” *Yeah, all things considered, they were fairly calm in nature.* “Anyway, I’ll make coffee, so please take a seat. Oh, would you rather have tea?”

“Thanks, I’m fine with coffee,” said Rei.

“Me too,” said Kisuke.

The two of them sat down on the sofa and looked around the store, intrigued. Holmes went into the kitchenette.

Several minutes later...

“Oh, you’re coming to see the Kaomise too? Thank you. The travel show we’re filming right now is also going to be promoting it.” Kisuke talked cheerfully while drinking his coffee.

Holmes finished serving the coffee and sat down across from him. “It’s your first Kaomise after your succession in September. You must be excited. I’m looking forward to it.” He smiled warmly.

They were so elegant; I felt like I was watching two young men at a tea ceremony or flower arrangement club.

“Yes. The name ‘Kisuke’ was my dream, so I want to put on a performance worthy of it.”

Right, Kisuke Ichikata had just inherited that name this fall. Since he was on TV so much, that name had already been ingrained in my mind. But before this fall, he would’ve had a different name.

“Kisuke’s face changed after the succession,” Rei said, giggling.

“Did it?”

“Yes, it’s a lot tenser now.”

The kabuki actor and the former Takarazuka star blinded me with their radiance as they chatted. Overwhelmed by their superstar aura, all I could do was sit in the corner, sipping my café au lait anxiously.

Akihito, who was actually just as radiant as they were, leaned forward and looked at Kisuke, who was sitting two seats away from him. “Come to think of it, you have an older brother, right? Isn’t he a kabuki actor too? Does that not affect the succession at all?”

Kisuke smiled wryly and said stiffly, “Well, in the world of kabuki, skill is everything...”

The world of performing arts sure is strict. It doesn’t matter who’s the oldest; the name goes to the most talented. I don’t know anything about Kisuke’s older brother, but he must’ve been frustrated that his younger brother took the name, right? As I made my own unfair assumptions, Kisuke continued to drink his coffee and look around the store.

“This store looked small from the entrance, but it’s actually quite deep, huh?” he remarked.

“Yes, and there’s so many different things.” Rei also seemed interested.

“Feel free to have a look,” Holmes said, gesturing towards the back of the store. “We have a wide variety of items.”

“In that case...” The two stood up and excitedly began exploring.

“Well, this place *is* interesting the first time you come here,” Akihito said, nodding. “You’ve got stuff from both the East and the West.” He glanced around the store.

Now that the glamorous two were no longer in sight, my nervousness was gone and I could finally open my mouth. “Akihito, this store actually has incense, aroma oil, and bath salts too.”

“For real? I had no idea.”

“Holmes and the owner bought the bath salts when they went to Europe. I like them too.” I showed him a bath salt set.

“Huh.” Akihito took it from me, seeming interested. “I guess I’ll buy one then. I’m a bit tired these days.”

“Thank you for your patronage,” Holmes said. “You had a sudden change in lifestyle. How is your health?” he asked in a surprisingly nice tone as he put the bath salts in a paper bag. Maybe he was happy because of the sale.

“Physically I’m fine, but mentally, it’s kind of complicated.”

“You’re capable of having complicated feelings too, Akihito?” Holmes said bluntly.

Akihito’s face stiffened. “Ugh, you really never change. Well, I think you’re best that way. The people who used to make fun of me, saying I’d never make it big—they’ve all done a one-eighty. At first I thought, ‘Serves you right!’ but it’s gotten kind of boring now.” He sighed deeply. “The moment Kisuke found out that I’m the son of the author Naotaka Kajiwara, his attitude completely changed, and now he actually talks to me. Well, it’s whatever,” he continued in a quiet voice.

Holmes smiled and nodded. “That’s good, Akihito.”

“Huh?”

“The most important thing is to be able to brush these things off with ‘Well,

it's whatever.' You don't need to get attached to every person who comes and goes. Do your best at the work you're given and show courtesy. That's your top priority right now," Holmes advised him gently.

Akihito's eyes welled up with tears. "Holmes... You *are* a good guy. You're a real bro."

"I'd rather not be your bro."

"You're so mean!"

I smiled at the two of them. Suddenly, I realized that Kisuke and Rei hadn't returned. I peered further into the store. *Come to think of it, they went all the way to the back. What if they broke something and are afraid to come back?* I stood up and headed in.

"Mm!"

I heard a sweet moan of pleasure ring out and stopped. Craning my neck, I saw Kisuke and Rei locked in a kiss in the very back of the store. I gasped and covered my mouth.

After their lips parted, Rei panted, saying, "K-Kisuke, stop. Not here."

"Don't lie. Your face says you want it." Kisuke pulled her body closer and kissed her again.

N-No way! Kisuke Ichikata and Rei Asamiya are in a relationship? Oh gosh, what do I do?! This is huge!

...Wait, isn't Kisuke Ichikata rumored to be dating a model? I guess that's not true, and it's actually Rei. W-Wow. Either way, I've seen something crazy. This is so scary. I need to get out of here.

I quietly slinked away, feeling like I'd discovered a state secret. Suddenly, my shoulder bumped against a shelf, sending a small bottle of aroma oil tumbling to the ground.

"O-Oh no!" I hurried to pick it up.

"Man, there's just so much stuff here. They've got things from all over the world."

“Indeed, I can’t stop looking at them.”

The two came out of the back of the store with nonchalant looks on their faces. There wasn’t a hint of anything that’d gone on between them. *Wow! This is real acting!*

I stayed crouched down so that they wouldn’t notice I was being suspicious and picked up the bottle.

“Kisuke, Rei! The staff called me just now and said they fixed the equipment. They want us to head back.” Akihito’s carefree voice echoed through the store, saving me from my predicament.

“Oh, that was surprisingly fast,” said Rei. “Thanks for the coffee, Holmes. I’ll visit again.” She waved with a gorgeous smile.

“See ya!” Akihito waved too, holding up his paper bag.

“The coffee was delicious. Thank you.” Kisuke bowed. *Proper manners, as expected from a kabuki actor.*

“Anytime,” Holmes said. He walked up to Kisuke and offered him a tissue. “Before you go, your mouth...” Holmes pointed at the corner of his own mouth.

“...Oh!” Kisuke awkwardly accepted the tissue, wiped his mouth, and hurried out of the store.

With the three celebrities gone, Kura became dead silent. I looked at Holmes and asked hesitantly, “D-Did it...get on his mouth?” I hadn’t noticed since I didn’t look closely at his face.

“Just a bit. Even if I hadn’t said anything, no one would’ve noticed. But it’s irritating to have people making out in the store, so I reprimanded him.”

So Holmes noticed too. And he pointed it out as a reprimand because it was irritating? There’s his black-hearted side!

He had a point, though. How could you do that in such a dignified store? Of course it would be irritating to Holmes, who treasures this place.

“I’ve been holding back too,” Holmes murmured.

“Huh?” I looked up. I hadn’t quite caught what he said.

“Nothing. Those were some glamorous guests, huh?”

“Y-Yes. Celebrities really are dazzling, huh? I’ve never seen any from this close before, so I was extremely nervous.”

Holmes blinked. “Never? You see Akihito all the time, right?”

“Oh, you’re right.” I shrugged.

Holmes laughed. “Despite how he acts, I’d say he’s fairly glamorous in his own right.”

“Maybe, but I guess he’s too friendly.”

“Well, that might be one of his good traits.”

“It’s rare for you to compliment him, Holmes.”

“Indeed. My evaluation of him rose slightly because he hasn’t changed despite all of the new work he’s gotten.” He chuckled.

That’s true. Akihito’s gotten way more exposure lately. You’d think he’d get stuck-up, but he actually hasn’t changed at all. That might be an amazing thing. I hope he stays the way he is.

“I was surprised that Kisuke and Rei were in a relationship, though. That’s a power couple that’d make waves in the entertainment industry.” I sighed hotly. “I think they really suit each other. They should just make it public already.”

“Indeed...” Holmes nodded without making eye contact.

“Huh?” I furrowed my brow. It seemed like he had something on his mind... *Knowing how sharp he is, he might’ve sensed something.*

I found out a few days later, when a shocking headline came out:

“Kisuke Ichikata Gets Engaged to a Former Model from a Rich Family!”

4

“I...I don’t think I’ll be able to trust men ever again!” My hands trembled as I looked at the newspaper’s entertainment column in disbelief.

The night after the engagement news broke out, the other model who he was

rumored to be in a relationship with posted on social media, “Engaged? What the hell?! Die, jerk!” As a result, there was a news article the next day that said “Kisuke Ichikata Got Engaged Without Sorting Out His Relationships First!” And of course, I’d also seen him sharing a passionate kiss with former Takarazuka star Rei Asamiya. In other words, Kisuke had been involved with three women at the same time: the former model from a rich family that he got engaged to, the other model, and Rei Asamiya. It was even more shocking since I’d witnessed part of it myself. My distrust of men had come roaring back.

“Now, now. Don’t say that, Aoi.” Holmes let out a chuckle as he reviewed the accounting book at the counter.

I frowned and turned to face him. “What do you think, Holmes? Isn’t he terrible? He was three-timing!”

“I understand why you’d say that, but it’s not his fault.”

“Wh-What?” *Is there a special reason for this? A secret, complicated reason why he has to be a three-timer? I can’t imagine what it could possibly be.*

“He’s a kabuki actor,” Holmes continued.

I stopped in my tracks. “Um, what do you mean by that?”

“That’s all there is to it. He’s a kabuki actor—womanizing is part of his craft.”

“What?!”

“Kabuki actors who shine on stage have an insatiable sensuality. It’s like their destiny.”

“I-I really don’t get it!”

“Once you’ve seen a kabuki performance, you might understand why it’s not logical. Love, relationship drama, and the resulting carnage all make up the flesh and blood of their art. That’s how they become incredible actors,” Holmes said passionately, placing his hand on his chest.

I was dumbfounded. “Th-That’s not a good reason! I can’t believe it. I don’t care if he’s a kabuki actor—three-timing is just too much!” I snapped.

Holmes nodded. “Yes, you’re absolutely right.”

“Huh?”

“That’s why people like you must stay away from those kinds of men. A woman who marries an entertainer must have an aggressive mindset: ‘Womanizing is essential for his art, but I will be the keeper of his heart.’ Otherwise, she won’t last.”

“S-So it has to be someone who’s open-minded?”

“It’s not a matter of being open-or closed-minded. It’s about what she’s willing to put up with. Some people are fine with a poor partner but have zero tolerance for cheating, and the reverse exists as well. It’s a matter of personality.”

“O-Oh...” *So people in the world of entertainment chase after love to that extent.* “B-But...what about Tozaburo Ichikata, the one they call a major figure in kabuki?! Isn’t he famous for being devoted to his wife?!” Tozaburo Ichikata—Kisuke’s uncle—was considered the leader of the kabuki world. He married a former actress, and he often declared on TV that he was dedicated to his wife and had never cheated. It might’ve been a lie, but there were never any scandals. Apparently he’d fallen in love with her at first sight when he was young. He polished his skills so that he’d be a good match for her and courted her over and over until he finally managed to marry her.

“Ah yes, he is.”

“R-Right?”

“However, he also had quite a few rumors circulating before he met his wife.”

“B-But not after he got married, right?”

“I suppose. He was able to marry a woman who captured his heart to that extent. So, Kisuke might also change after he marries his fiancée.”

“R-Really? I hope so...” *Wait, is this really okay?*

“Anyway, I’m looking forward to the Kaomise.”

“Oh, same. In a lot of ways now.”

“A lot, you say?” Holmes smiled, amused.

“S-Sorry, I’m honestly just looking forward to the show,” I said, flustered.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m also looking forward to it in ‘a lot of ways.’”

We exchanged looks and laughed. The plan was to see the daytime performance on opening day and then have dinner in Ponto-cho. “It’s a bonus from Kura, so the least I can do is treat you to a meal,” he’d said. My first-ever kabuki show, followed by Ponto-cho... I felt out of my league, but I still looked forward to it excitedly as I folded the newspaper.

5

It was then November 29th, the day before the Kaomise. I was in high spirits as I did my usual cleaning...or not.

“Aoi, you did this calculation wrong.”

“Oh, you’re right.” I groaned and erased the formula I’d written. I was studying for my exams at Kura.

“You make a lot of careless mistakes and you spend a long time on calculations. Do you often run out of time on math tests?” Holmes asked calmly, looking at my answers.

“Yes, I do.” I slumped my shoulders.

“It’s not easy to go faster, so it’d be better to focus on getting things right,” he murmured to himself, adjusting his square glasses. Apparently those glasses were just for show: “Wearing glasses makes me feel more like a home tutor,” he’d said before, making my face twitch. He was surprisingly superficial.

“O-Okay.”

“Next time, try to score points efficiently.”

“I think my studying fundamentals are bad to begin with, especially when it comes to math.” I sighed.

Holmes flipped open the workbook. “Let’s see... For math, you should open the workbook, pick out the hardest problem on the page, and try solving it. If you succeed, then you can consider the problems on that page solved and move

on. If you can't solve it, then you'll know that you're not good at that type, right?"

"O-Oh, I can save time that way!"

"Correct. Looking at your answers, I think we can get your score up five points with a bit of adjustment. If you put in a little effort it'll be another ten points, for a total of fifteen per subject. With some more work, we could manage twenty."

"T-Twenty more points? That doesn't sound easy."

"Don't worry. I created problems based on the topics covered by the tests, so please do those first."

"A-All right."

Suddenly, the door chime rang. *Oh, a customer! But...I'm not here as an employee right now, so I don't have to greet them, right? I'm just a suspicious high school girl doing homework at the end of the counter.* I shrank into my seat, wishing I could run away.

"Ah, Kiskey. Welcome."

I whirled around at Holmes's words. There at the door was Kiskey Ichikata in the flesh. He wore a light coat, a hat, glasses, and a scarf, so he might not have been recognizable at first glance.

"Hello," Kiskey greeted with a smile, bowing. I quietly bowed back.

"Please take a seat if you'd like," Holmes said, standing up and pulling a chair out for him.

"Thank you." Kiskey sat down two seats away from me, took off his hat, and looked at me. "Oh, are you the young lady who was working here last time?" His eyes widened as though he'd just realized.

"Y-Yes. Welcome."

"Are you here as a customer today?"

"Not exactly... Holmes is tutoring me," I said awkwardly in a quiet voice.

"Huh, Holmes sure is caring if he's tutoring a part-timer. Oh, sorry, I ended up

calling you ‘Holmes’ too.”

“Don’t worry, you can call me anything you’d like. I’ll make coffee.”

“Thank you.”

Holmes went to the kitchenette and prepared the drip coffee as usual. A fragrant aroma spread through the store.

“It’s finally the first day tomorrow, right?” he said, coming out with a tray. “I’ve been looking forward to it.”

“Are you coming on the first day?”

“Yes, Aoi and I will be at the daytime performance. My grandfather said he was going to watch the prologue of the evening session.” He placed coffee cups in front of me and Kisuke.

“Thank you.” Kisuke bowed and drank his coffee in somewhat of a rush. “It’s good,” he murmured sincerely.

“I’m glad to hear that.” Holmes’s smile looked sincere too.

“Practice just ended...and I have a one-hour break while they do the equipment inspections. I suddenly had a craving for your coffee. Sorry, I shouldn’t be coming to an antique store to drink coffee. How rude of me.” Kisuke put his hands on his head and smiled awkwardly.

“No, I’m very happy to hear that.” Holmes really liked brewing coffee and having it complimented. *I feel kind of bad for always getting café au lait.* I slumped my shoulders and brought the cup to my mouth.

“Oh right, congratulations on your engagement, Kisuke,” said Holmes. I nearly spat out my drink, but managed to get away with a choked cough instead.

Kisuke scratched his head sheepishly. “Ah, it’s kind of embarrassing when you know what happened last time, what with all the fuss. Thank you, though.”

“You’re an actor. It’s part of your profession, right?” Holmes said gently.

Kisuke looked relieved.

Even if Holmes forgives you, none of the women in the world do! Including me! I secretly thought to myself.

“So, is there any other reason you came here, Kisuke?” Holmes asked quietly. I looked up in surprise.

Kisuke seemed startled too. “Wh-Why do you ask?”

“You’ve seemed restless ever since you arrived.”

Now that he mentions it, Kisuke was fidgeting. Was he trying to gauge the right time to say something?

“Did your engagement cause any problems?” Holmes pressed.

I gulped. *Holmes can ask that without hesitation, huh?*

“Oh, no... It’s not relationship-related.” Kisuke reached into his breast pocket and took out an A4 sheet of paper that was folded in half. He placed it on the counter. On the paper was vertical text that looked like it’d been printed from a computer: “Your succeeding to the name Kisuke Ichikata is unacceptable. Withdraw or else your prologue won’t be happening.”

Holmes and I fell silent upon reading the message. *Is this...a threat?* I didn’t know much about the entertainment industry, but I could imagine this kind of jealousy existing.

Holmes wordlessly put on his white gloves and picked up the paper. “There are traces of Scotch tape. Was this posted somewhere? Was it a place that would strike fear in you...and was there a large quantity of these?” he murmured.

Kisuke shuddered. “Y-Yes, that’s right. They were posted all over my dressing room walls. Er, how did you know that?”

“This wasn’t printed directly from a computer—it was photocopied. It’s hard to believe that someone intending to harass would make only a single copy. Making many copies and sticking them all over the place would cause more psychological pressure, right? Now, if they were stuck to your car, then that could be brushed off as a troublesome hater. However, it’s a different story if they were able to reach backstage areas,” Holmes said smoothly.

Kisuke’s eyes widened. *It’s only natural to be shocked and amazed when you haven’t experienced Holmes’s deductions.* I couldn’t help but giggle.

“That...was incredible. I expected no less from someone who Akihito repeatedly called ‘amazing.’” Kiskey scratched his head, dumbfounded.

Holmes tilted his head. “Akihito, you say?”

I thought it was strange too. Why would Kiskey trust Akihito’s opinion that much?

“He’s a very honest person,” Kiskey continued.

Holmes and I nodded. It made sense—Akihito only compliments people that he truly thinks are amazing. He doesn’t try to flatter people and he doesn’t seem afraid to say rude opinions, even to someone like Kiskey.

“After the day I first met you, Akihito wouldn’t stop saying, ‘Holmes really is an amazing guy,’” Kiskey said seriously, wrapping his hands around his coffee cup.

I don’t think that’s a good habit to have...

“I see. I’ll reprimand him.”

Holmes! I almost burst out laughing.

Kiskey smiled beside me. “You and Akihito really are good friends, huh?”

“I don’t know about that. More importantly, about this paper...” Holmes held up the paper and Kiskey’s expression became serious again. “They were posted on a dressing room wall in Minamiza Theater, but there weren’t any witnesses?”

Kiskey’s shoulders trembled. “N-No, there weren’t. I asked around to see if there’d been any intruders, but no one saw any.”

“Was the room locked?”

“No. My manager holds on to my valuables for me.”

“I see. Anyone could’ve gone in then, to an extent.”

“N-No, there weren’t any shows that day. We were having a rehearsal on stage. I doubt there were any regular visitors.”

No regular visitors in the building. Anyone from outside would stick out like a sore thumb if they were found backstage, so that was extremely unlikely to be

the case.

“In that case, there’s a chance that this malicious harassment was the work of an insider. Since the Kaomise is coming up, you didn’t want to cause a commotion by getting the police involved, right?”

“Y-Yes, you’re exactly right. How do you know so much?” Sweat ran down his forehead. He must’ve been very shocked.

“It’s because you went out of your way to come here and consult with me. No matter what Akihito said about me, you still wouldn’t have known how skilled I was. Based off of that, I sensed that you were grasping at straws because there were no witnesses and you couldn’t ask the police.”

“I-I see.” Kiskey nodded, wiping his sweat with his handkerchief.

“How many people disapproved of your succeeding to the name of Kiskey Ichikata?”

“Er... I’m sure there are a lot.”

“Huh? Really?” I spoke up without thinking.

Kiskey smiled slightly and nodded. “Yes, this is the entertainment industry, after all. There are many actors who wanted the name for themselves, including my older brother.”

“Do you know why you were chosen?”

“The main reason was that Tozaburo Ichikata supported me.” Tozaburo Ichikata, Kiskey’s uncle and the leader of the kabuki world. He married a former actress and is known for being loyal to his wife. “As for why he supported me, well... The kabuki world needs a star attraction, right? Other candidates might be as skilled, but I’m the one with the most popularity.” He smiled self-deprecatingly.

Kiskey makes a lot of media appearances, so he’s popular with the younger generation. He’s the most well-known kabuki actor right now. To be honest, I don’t really know any kabuki actors besides him myself. Even if it’s a traditional art, it’s still entertainment. A famous person could very well be the preferred choice.

“It’s been three months since you inherited the name. Were you harassed like this before?”

“No. People may have been whispering behind my back, but this kind of blatant harassment only began recently.”

“I see. Could it have started after your engagement was announced?” Holmes continued.

Sweat formed on Kisuke’s forehead again. He was surprisingly easy to read. “H-How did you know?”

“You didn’t have such a dark shadow over your face the last time you came here. The only major thing that happened since then was your engagement. Therefore, this harassment has something to do with that. Sorry to ask, but why did you get engaged so early, when you’re still pursuing young women? Your partner didn’t get pregnant, did she?”

Wh-Whoa! Holmes is putting on the pressure again. I listened anxiously. As Holmes said, I also found it surprising that he would’ve gotten engaged so young unless the woman was pregnant.

“I-It’s because I wanted to live with her. However, her family is very strict, so they wouldn’t allow it unless we were getting married.”

“I see. Are you living with your fiancée now?”

“Yes.”

“It seems that the culprit is someone near you who disapproves of both your engagement and your succession. Does anyone who matches that description come to mind?”

Kisuke’s eyes widened and his face went pale. He was trembling. He must’ve realized who the culprit was.

“N-No, I have...no idea...” He snatched the paper off the counter and stood up. “I-I have to go back to the rehearsal. Sorry for the intrusion. Thank you.” He bowed and turned around as if eager to get away. Right as he grabbed the doorknob, Holmes called out to him softly. He turned around with a stiff expression.

“From this harassment, I can tell that the person is driven by uncontrollable feelings,” Holmes said with a firm gaze. “There’s no telling what a person like this is going to do. Please be careful.”

Kisuke gulped. “Th-Thank you... I will.” He bowed again and left the store. The door chime echoed in his wake. Outside the window, I could see him walking away quickly. I felt apprehensive about the grim expression on his face.

The opening day of the Kaomise was tomorrow.

6

A day passed, and it was now November 30th—the first day of Kaomise performances. The daytime show began at 10:30 a.m., so Holmes and I decided to meet up at 10 a.m. at the small police station next to the Shijo Bridge. I got on the Keihan Line at Demachiyanagi Station and got off at Gion-Shijo Station. Holmes had apparently stayed at his family’s apartment in Yasaka, so he would’ve passed by the theater to get to our meeting spot.

When I arrived, Holmes was already there. “Aoi,” he called when he saw me, raising his hand. He smiled handsomely, backed by the Kamo River glistening under the morning sun. His casual suit looked good on him.

“S-Sorry for making you wait.” I didn’t know what to wear, so I ended up wearing my favorite mid-length coat, a new dress I’d bought, and a pair of mid-calf boots.

“You look very cute today. That outfit looks nice on you,” Holmes said with a smile.

My face flushed. *Come to think of it, he casually compliments the women that come to the store too, so he must be able to say these things easily. I can’t get the wrong idea,* I warned myself. “Y-You’re good at saying those things, huh?”

“Not at all. Shall we go?”

“Okay.”

We crossed the Shijo Bridge.

“There’s a reason why we met up at the police station across from

Minamiza,” Holmes said as we walked.

“Huh?” I tilted my head. *Now that he mentions it, Minamiza is diagonally across the intersection. He didn’t pick the police station because it’d be easier to find.*

“I wanted you to see Minamiza bustling with people for the Kaomise from a distance.” He stopped walking and looked diagonally across. “Here in the birthplace of kabuki is Japan’s oldest theater. It truly attracts the eye with its majestic gabled roof in the style of the Momoyama period.”

“Yes, it’s very imposing.” *It’s safe to say that if you come to the Shijo Bridge, Minamiza Theater will always catch your eye.* It was a dignified, elegant Japanese-style theater. The highlights were the big red paper lanterns that said “Minamiza” on them and the rows of signs with the actors’ names on them. “Come to think of it, those name plates aren’t usually there, right?”

“Correct. Those are called an ‘invitation,’ and they’re put up during the Kaomise so that you can see the extravagant cast at a glance.”

“Oh, so that’s what they’re called!” I nodded.

There were already a lot of people in front of the theater. I could see women wearing kimono and men in dress suits. But there were also many people wearing normal, everyday clothes. It was really a mix.

We crossed the street and walked towards the building. The place was full of people and everyone was smiling happily. *It’s too late to say this now, but will I really be able to tell how good the performance is? Holmes went to all the trouble of bringing me here, but when I watched kabuki plays on TV, I couldn’t even tell what they were talking about.* I was a bit nervous, overwhelmed by the crowd in front of the entrance.

Meanwhile, Holmes was fiddling with something with his usual smooth motions. *What’s he doing?* I wondered, and he handed me something that looked like a small black radio.

“Here you go.”

“Um, what’s this?” There were earphones attached to it.

“It’s an audio guide.”

“Really?! I didn’t know there was such a thing!”

“Yes, most people borrow them. It provides thorough explanations so that you’ll be able to understand the lines and comfortably enjoy the show.”

Oh, so that’s how you watch kabuki plays! Phew, I’m not the only one who can’t understand that gibberish. Relieved, I entered the crowded lobby with Holmes. There was red carpeting and rows of pedestal-like things about waist-high, made of bamboo.

“What are those?” I asked.

“Those are called ‘bamboo horses.’ It’s a Minamiza tradition to deliver congratulatory messages to the actors on horses made of bamboo. It’s their equivalent of flower wreaths.”

“Wow, I’ve never seen these before.”

“Oh,” Holmes said, looking up. “Aoi, do you see that young lady over there, wearing a kimono?”

I looked over. She was a beautiful, refined-looking woman wearing a light-colored semi-formal kimono.

“That’s the former model who Kiskeye got engaged to,” Holmes continued. “The one from a wealthy family.”

“Ohhh.” *I see. An elegant, traditional Japanese woman. A fitting choice for a kabuki actor at the height of his popularity.* I watched her from a distance as we entered the hall, which seemed to be completely vermilion. There were paper lanterns on the walls. It had...a unique atmosphere, completely different from normal theaters.

“This way, Aoi.” Holmes guided me to the frontmost center row on the second floor. We had a very good view of the stage.

“U-Um, these are good seats, right?” I asked as I sat down.

“Yes, the seats in this row are called ‘special seats.’”

“Special seats?!” My eyes widened. “U-Um...is this okay?”

“Aoi, this is a place for once-a-year splurging.” He chuckled, his eyes thinning into slits.

“O-Oh...”

“More importantly, this is one of the Yagashira family’s rules.”

“Rules?”

“One of my grandfather’s doctrines is ‘do not spare any expense when it comes to arts and entertainment for the purpose of improving yourself.’”

“That sounds like something he’d say.” *Don’t spare any expense when it comes to improving yourself. In other words, pay when you have to—the words of a wealthy merchant.* “Is it only this row that’s special?”

“No, the seats on the first floor, next to the elevated walkway, are special too. I went for the second floor this time because I wanted you to see everything as a whole.” He looked towards the side seats on the first floor. “Oh, Aoi, the devoted husband Tozaburo Ichikata is sitting over there,” he said cheerfully.

“Huh?” I craned my neck to look at the special seats on the first floor. Tozaburo Ichikata and his wife, the former actress, were there. “W-Wow, you’re right! They look exactly the same as on TV. His wife is really pretty.” I couldn’t help but fangirl—his wife looked so young and attractive, even though she had to be in her fifties. As I looked down at the first-floor special seating, I heard some familiar voices.

“Hey, it’s Holmes and Aoi!”

“Ah, hello you two.”

I turned around and saw Akihito and Rei Asamiya.

“Akihito and Rei! You came too?” I exclaimed.

“Yes, it’s Kisuke’s first day, so I wanted to watch both performances today.” Rei checked her ticket and sat next to Holmes. Apparently she had a special seat too.

“I figured I’d come see the first day too,” Akihito said. “Then I ran into Rei. Didn’t think you and Holmes would be here too.” He patted Holmes on the head a few times from behind.

“You don’t have to make physical contact with me at every chance you get,” Holmes said, brushing Akihito’s hand away in annoyance. “Aren’t you going to sit down?”

Akihito pointed upstairs. “My seat’s class four, so it’s all the way at the back of the third floor. Figured I’d get the cheapest one and call it a day.”

“As someone in the entertainment industry, it’d be nice if you had the dedication to get a better seat for the sake of learning.” Holmes gave Akihito an icy look. My face stiffened.

“Man, you gotta tell me these things *before* I buy tickets,” Akihito replied, laughing heartily and patting Holmes on the head again. *He really is the strongest one here.*

Holmes sighed. “Here, Akihito. You can have this if you want.” He offered him a thick booklet that he’d bought in the lobby. It was the same as the one he’d bought for me.

“The guide? Uh, I don’t buy these things at movies either.”

“Don’t say that. One of the acts this time happens to be *Beckoning at Itsukushima*.”

“*Beckoning at Itsukushima*?”

“Yes, where Kiyomori calls back the setting sun. Have you forgotten already? This is the program that is the basis for the hanging scroll your father gave to your older brother.”

Akihito immediately took the booklet, his expression changing. He flipped through it and found a picture of Kiyomori holding a fan. “Oh, thanks. I’ll make sure to read through it. All right, I’m going to my seat now.” Booklet in hand, he headed to the third floor with a serious look on his face.

Rei giggled as she watched him leave. “Ah, I think I understand now why Akihito called you his teacher. You give him lectures like that, right?”

Holmes smiled at her. “He’s always exaggerating.”

Rei laughed cheerfully. I recalled the passionate kiss she’d shared with Kisuke at Kura the other day. From her face, she looked just as spirited as when we’d

first met. There were no dark clouds hanging over her. *If she's coming to see his play, does that mean she's gotten over it? She's even watching both of today's performances...*

"Please turn off your mobile phones and other devices," came an announcement.

"Oh, I have to turn mine off," Rei said.

"Me too." I took out my smartphone and noticed that I had a message from Akihito. "Huh? Akihito texted me."

"Same here," Holmes replied. "It looks like he sent it to both of us at the same time."

Before turning off my phone, I checked the message from Akihito: "Oh nooo! That model Kisuke was rumored to be with is here in the fourth-class seats!" There was an excited emoji.

Holmes and I silently exchanged glances before smiling awkwardly and turning off our phones.

"Hm? What did Akihito say?" Rei looked at us.

I froze. We couldn't exactly say that the model from the rumors was here.

"He's just looking for attention like always." Holmes put his phone in his inner pocket. "I'm impressed that you're seeing both performances today, though. Did Kisuke give you the tickets?" he asked, smoothly changing the subject.

"No, I bought them myself. I used to be in the Takarazuka Revue, you know? I love theater."

"I see."

"Plus...I'm Kisuke's fan," she whispered, gazing at the stage. Suddenly, she turned to Holmes, and said, "You saw what happened at your store that day, right? Can you keep it a secret? Kisuke's engaged now, after all." She winked and held her index finger in front of her mouth in a "shhh" gesture.

Unable to understand her feelings, I leaned in and asked, "U-Um, you're not mad at him, Rei?"

Rei chuckled and shrugged. “I don’t like it, but he belongs to a special world. Besides, I already knew about his fiancée and the model,” she said indifferently.

I was startled. *I-Is it okay for her to say that here?* I panicked and looked around, but since we were talking quietly, it didn’t seem like anyone else had heard. I placed my hand on my chest, relieved.

“Does that mean he didn’t hide them from you?” I asked.

“Right. That man can’t hold his liquor at all. Once he gets drunk, he starts talking about other women, and I guess I just can’t hate him for it. He’s always complimenting them—‘She’s a good person,’ ‘She’s cute,’ and so on. Men usually talk badly about other women to trick you into thinking you’re number one, right? But he doesn’t do that at all, or rather, he can’t, because he loves everyone. I do get fed up with him, but I can never bring myself to hate him,” she said, crossing her legs and resting her chin in her hands. She smiled and shrugged.

If I recall correctly, Rei is older than Kisuke. Maybe she finds him endearing. That said, it’s hard for me to understand his appeal in this case...

“Well, it’s over now anyway,” she continued. “Pursuing an engaged person would be breaking the rules. So, this conversation ends here.” She grinned.

My chest tightened. *It must be painful for her on the inside, but she looks so dignified and beautiful smiling like that...* Holmes and I nodded silently at her.

It was finally time for the show to begin. I quietly looked at the booklet. The programs for today’s daytime performance were:

Act One: Beckoning at Itsukushima: Kiyomori Calls Back the Setting Sun

Act Two: The Bridal Journey: The Treasury of Loyal Retainers

Act Three: The Old Couple

Act Four: The Two Wankyus

Act Five: Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees

“Kabuki shows are a collection of short stories rather than one big story, huh?” I remarked.

“Yes. Come to think of it, Aoi, have you seen any stage plays before?”

“Only *Phantom of the Opera* by a famous theater troupe.”

“Ah, no wonder you thought it’d be a single story. As you can see, kabuki is often split into several separate acts like this.”

“I see,” I said, impressed.

It was time for the first act, *Beckoning at Itsukushima*, to begin.

“At the peak of his reign, Taira no Kiyomori rebuilt Itsukushima Shrine,” the audio guide began. “This is a tale from that ceremony.”

The performance began. The lines were all in that unique kabuki style, so an amateur like me had no idea what they were saying. But thanks to the audio guide’s explanations I could understand everything that was going on and focus on the actual performance with ease. Without it, I would’ve been completely clueless. *It might be an essential tool.*

The stage backdrop was Itsukushima Island and a vermilion Shinto shrine. The majestic Kiyomori was there with his retainer and concubines. Kiyomori sat in the middle, his powerful aura overwhelming anyone who set eyes on him. It felt like I was getting a peek at history itself—the real Kiyomori could’ve been like this too. The dancing girl performing the dedication rites was captivatingly beautiful. Since kabuki actors are all male, that dancing girl was played by a man too, of course. But his dance was so graceful and feminine that you couldn’t tell.

Kiyomori was very pleased with the dancing girl and said, “I shall reward you. Come hither.” She respectfully approached him, and suddenly, she shouted “Enemy of my father!” and slashed at him with a dagger. Everything suddenly grew tense. The wooden clappers echoed through the hall. My heart was pounding from the intensity.

In the end, Kiyomori escaped injury and the dancing girl was arrested. She said that she was the daughter of Minamoto no Yoshitomo, Lady Kokonoe. Kiyomori was stunned by this revelation, but he told her that he and Yoshitomo had been the closest of friends since childhood, and he still lamented that he was forced to kill him. Thus, he couldn’t cause harm to his best friend’s daughter. He said he would pardon her, but his vassals protested, saying that

letting her go free would lead to future disaster. However, his retainer held them back, saying, “No, we must not stain this important ceremony with blood. Above all, it is Lord Kiyomori’s will.” In the end, the woman was pardoned and set free.

Finally, it was time for the ceremony to begin. However, the commanders were still standing on the shore. They said that it was difficult to understand the tides in that area, so the construction work was not progressing well. Since it didn’t seem like they’d be able to finish while the sun was up, Kiyomori’s retainer suggested that they postpone the ceremony. Upon hearing the situation, Kiyomori stood up and declared, “I shall lift the setting sun!”

His vassals and sons were taken aback.

“Even my father, the most powerful man in this world, cannot possibly move the sun.”

“He’s right, Lord Kiyomori!”

Kiyomori laughed fearlessly at their protests. “Hah, is it not said that a Chinese king once shot nine suns out of the sky? Lifting the sun back up is a simple task in comparison.” He picked up a large folding fan and raised it upwards. The setting sun really did begin to rise.

“How could this be?!”

The act came to an end with everyone trembling in fear and Kiyomori looking confident.

I sat there in awe, gaping. *The story ends with Kiyomori moving the sun? That’s so absurd.*

“This program is a representation of how powerful and boastful Kiyomori was, to the point where he claimed he could even move the sun,” Holmes whispered in my ear, having probably noticed my bewilderment. “Also, the people who have performed the role of Kiyomori in the past were all the top stars of their time.”

I nodded in understanding and looked back at the stage. The story developments were surprising, but the kabuki performance itself was truly amazing. It’d pulled me into a unique world right away, making me forget about

reality. The drama had been portrayed beautifully through graceful dance, song, and acting. It was fascinating. I understood why Holmes said that traditional performance art was part of fine art. In kabuki, the stage itself is art.

Before long it was time for an intermission. Everyone around us excitedly started opening their bento lunchboxes.

Startled, I asked, “Huh? Does everyone eat their lunch in here?”

“Yes. There’s also a dedicated eating area, but buying lunch from the catering service and eating in your seat is another one of kabuki’s charms,” Holmes explained, rummaging for something.

Next to him, Rei had a bento on her lap too. “I bought lunch from the store here,” she said with a proud smile.

“O-Oh.” I nodded.

Holmes took two bento out of a paper bag and handed me one. “Here you go. I ordered these from a caterer I’m fond of.”

“Th-Thank you.” I gulped upon seeing the extravagant lunch set.

“Ah, here’s a wet napkin. I have tea, too.” He passed me a wet napkin and a bottle.

“Th-Thank you again.” *He really is perfect at everything.* I felt ashamed of my useless self. I ate the delicious food, feeling defeated by Holmes’s hospitality.

The break ended and the second half of the show began. The next act was *The Two Wankys*. I checked the guide.

“Next is Matsunosuke’s—Kisuke’s older brother’s star turn,” Holmes whispered in my ear. I nodded, my heart racing.

The Two Wankys was a very sad story. Wankyu was a man who made a name for himself as a wealthy merchant. He falls deeply in love with a courtesan from the red-light district and spends an extravagant amount of money on her, causing his family to lock him in a cell. His yearning drives him insane and he escapes into a pine forest. Driven by madness and love, he dances in the moonlight.

Matsunosuke Ichikata's performance as Wankyu was incredibly powerful. Even an amateur like me could feel Wankyu's heart-wrenching grief, sorrow, and love for the woman. He was an amazing actor. It didn't seem like I was the only one who felt that way—after the act ended and the curtains closed, I heard people around us remarking on it.

"Matsunosuke's a real wonder."

"Yes, if skill was all that mattered, then he would've inherited the name."

"I agree. It's a shame that his sex-crazed younger brother stole it from him."

Apparently that was what kabuki fans thought. I had mixed feelings about it now, and looked down at the pictures in the guide.

The next act was the final one for the daytime show: at last, it was time for *Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees*, which Kisuke was starring in. From the title I thought that Yoshitsune had to be the main character, but it was actually Genkuro, a fox spirit disguising himself as Yoshitsune's retainer. Yoshitsune, under suspicion of treason by his elder brother, Yoritomo, flees the capital and is sheltered by a loyal subject on Mount Yoshino. Yoritomo finds out and a struggle ensues, but Genkuro fights to save the day in a noisy, entertaining story.

Kisuke was playing three roles: the fox spirit, Tadanobu Sato, and Minamoto no Yoshitsune. It was so amusing how the fox would pop out from the roof or under the floor—I couldn't take my eyes off him. His older brother's performance was incredible, but Kisuke was magnificent in his own way too. Most importantly, I sensed that he had "brilliance" as an actor.

The last scene took place in a stunning flurry of falling cherry blossoms. Genkuro floated into the air and left the stage as if galloping through the sky. It was an amazing climax—I never thought I'd get to see wire-flying in kabuki!

I watched in awe, wanting to break out into applause, when suddenly, Kisuke lost balance in midair. There seemed to be a problem with the wires. He fell, tracing an arc through the air, and slammed onto the stage floor. It sounded like it had been painful. Screams arose from the audience. The rushed curtain closing told us that this wasn't part of the plan.

“Aoi, Rei, come with me! This can’t be a mere accident.” Holmes quickly stood up. He had a grave expression on his face. *Right—Kisuke had been threatened.*

“Wh-What do you mean?” Rei asked as we ran after Holmes, her face pale.

“I’ll explain later,” Holmes replied. “Rei, people know your face. Could you persuade the staff to let us into Kisuke’s dressing room?”

“O-Okay!”

We exited the hall.

“Holmes!”

Akihito had run after us too. Behind him was Airi Kano, the model who was rumored to be in a relationship with Kisuke. *A-Akihito! How could you bring her along?!* While I stared at them, horrified, Rei talked to the staff and got permission for us to go to Kisuke’s dressing room.

7

We walked down the corridor until we saw a purple curtain that said “Kisuke Ichikata” on it. That was his dressing room.

“I’m fine! I’ll go to the hospital later, so let me stay here! Please just tape it up firmly! I’m begging you, let me do the opening day’s nighttime prologue!” We could hear Kisuke’s strained voice from all the way out here.

Phew, at least he’s safe, I thought, relieved by the loudness of his voice.

Holmes still wore a grave expression. “Excuse me, we’re coming in,” he declared, opening the door hesitantly.

It was a spacious room with tatami flooring. There was a big dresser and many bouquets of flowers.

“Holmes...” Kisuke looked at us, seeming surprised. His legs were stretched out on the floor, and his face was twisted in pain. Inside the room were several staff members, Tozaburo Ichikata and his wife, Kisuke’s fiancée, and his older brother, Matsunosuke Ichikata.

“Who are you people?!” Tozaburo glared suspiciously at our sudden intrusion.

“Master, this is my friend...Seiji Yagashira’s grandson,” Kiskey said, placing his hand on his injured leg and wincing in pain.

“Seiji’s grandson...” Tozaburo’s attitude immediately changed. The owner’s name was the magic word.

“Kiskey, what did the doctor say?” Holmes walked up to Kiskey, paying no attention to the others.

“He’s on the way. We normally have one on standby, but he happened to be delayed today because of an accident.”

“Sorry, this is going to hurt.” Holmes put his hands around Kiskey’s leg.

Kiskey hissed and winced harder. Everyone’s eyes widened in shock.

“It doesn’t seem broken,” Holmes said. “I’m impressed by your reflexes. Can someone get ice or something cold?!” he shouted. The panicking staff members suddenly came to their senses and ran off. They returned momentarily with ice to cool the injury.

“A-Are you a health care professional?” Tozaburo asked, bewildered by Holmes’s skillful emergency care.

“No, but I do martial arts, so I learned first aid.” *Come to think of it, Holmes did say that the owner made him learn martial arts from a young age.* “Please have the doctor do a proper examination when he arrives.” Holmes smiled.

“Thank you.” Kiskey bowed, then looked at Tozaburo. “Master, the bone isn’t broken. Please, let me do the prologue!” he pleaded desperately. His face was dead serious.

Tozaburo opened his mouth to speak, but—

“You can’t, Kiskey,” Holmes said coldly.

“Huh?”

Everyone looked at Holmes, surprised.

“You cannot go on stage in the current situation.”

Kiskey looked confused. “Why not...?”

“Because another ‘accident’ might happen,” Holmes answered in a low voice.

Everyone's eyes widened. They didn't know what he was talking about.

"Are you all aware that Kisuke received threatening notes?" he asked.

The staff averted their eyes. Tozaburo, however, blinked as though he had no idea. "Threatening notes?" he asked.

"Yes. It seems that you weren't aware. Is there anyone else who didn't know? Please raise your hand. I'm asking everyone here in this room."

Akihito immediately raised his hand. Next, Rei, Airi the model, Matsunosuke Ichikata, and Tozaburo's wife raised theirs. These were the people who didn't know. The ones who *did* know were the staff members and Kisuke's fiancée. Since the notes had been plastered all over these walls, it made sense that the staff knew. But it seemed that the other actors hadn't been informed.

"The threat claimed that Kisuke's succession was unacceptable and that they would prevent his prologue from taking place," Holmes explained calmly. "If this accident was the work of the sender, then they may attack him again if he tries to go back on stage to perform his prologue."

Everyone exchanged glances, looking surprised.

"B-But you know, young man, it's not unusual for us actors to be targeted by harassment," Tozaburo said, still bewildered. "I've received threatening messages in the past myself."

Holmes smiled bitterly. "The threats he received were posted on the walls of this very room, on a day when there were no public shows. And now, this incident has occurred. Do you think an ordinary person could have pulled this off?"

"What?" Tozaburo goggled, seeming genuinely shocked.

"This incident wasn't an accident..." Holmes began.

"It was!" Kisuke interrupted. "Yes, I received a threat. It said, 'Your succeeding to the name Kisuke Ichikata is unacceptable. Withdraw or else your prologue won't be happening.' Of course! I'm still inexperienced. I could receive hundreds of those and it wouldn't be strange no matter where they were posted! But this was an accident!" His voice blared in our ears.

The room went quiet. No one could say anything.

“I-It wasn’t an accident. He’s been suffering this whole time!” his fiancée shrieked, breaking the silence. Everyone quickly turned to her. She was trembling and looking down, wrapping her arms around herself. “He wouldn’t tell me anything...but he was afraid of someone. I’m sure he only moved ahead with our engagement because he didn’t want to be alone. I think he knows who the sender was,” she said feebly. *She must’ve been suffering too.*

“Do you have any ideas?” Holmes asked her.

She looked up, startled. “N-No, I don’t. But I feel like he does.”

“In that case, do you think the sender is a man or a woman?” he continued.

She cast her eyes down again. “I think...it’s a woman. I felt like he hastened his engagement with me because he wanted to get away from her. It must be a woman who doesn’t approve of us.”

In other words, one of the women who had a relationship with Kisuke—Rei and Airi.

“Wait, are you talking about *me*?” Airi spoke up for the first time, breathing heavily through her nose. “Yeah I didn’t like it, but I’m not that petty!” She crossed her arms.

Beside her, Rei nodded firmly. “Right. First of all, why would that lead to preventing the prologue? Wouldn’t they want to prevent the engagement?”

“Yeah! Who cares about the prologue?”

She had a point. That said, Kisuke was lucky that he got away with just an injured leg. One wrong step and he could’ve been in serious danger. Saying they were going to stop the prologue might’ve been a front for something more sinister. Alternatively, if they really were against the succession, then I’d suspect the older brother, Matsunosuke. *But considering the threat was about the prologue, Matsunosuke would be the first suspect, so I feel like that’d be too shortsighted of a plan... What if someone’s trying to frame him? Ugh, I don’t know anymore.*

“Let’s assume that this case was a sheer accident,” Holmes began. The rest of

us came back to our senses and looked up at him. “In that case, the timing of the wire malfunction was nothing short of a miracle. If Kisuke had progressed further, it would’ve been a life-threatening accident. He also could’ve fallen onto the audience. However, due to the timing, he didn’t fall on the audience and he was at a height where he could get away with a minor injury. Based on the other wire that was properly fixed in place, it also looked to me that he wouldn’t have fallen on his head. In fact, because of that, I originally wondered if it was part of the show.”

“What are you trying to say?” Tozaburo furrowed his brow.

“That was assuming it was an accident. Now, let’s assume it was intentional. The sender of the threat intentionally tampered with the wire. Normally, this would be impossible. However, it’s a different story if the culprit was a staff member. If one of the stagehands had a grudge against Kisuke, they may have been able to do it. That, or someone could’ve bribed the staff and prevented them from talking. In that case, I think it would’ve been difficult for Rei or the model. The world of kabuki is rather special.”

Matsunosuke shook with anger and glared at Holmes. “What, are you saying that I did it? You think I did it because everyone called me ‘the next Kisuke Ichikata’ and my brother swooped in and took it from me? Yeah, I was frustrated. I did want to get back at him, but my brother’s famous in the entertainment industry. Even I understand that in showbiz, popularity is king!” he shouted, eyes wide.

“Yes, I don’t think you did it either,” Holmes said smoothly.

Matsunosuke gaped as though he was expecting more of a fight.

“Tozaburo, let me ask you something,” Holmes said. “I hear that you were in strong support of him becoming the next Kisuke Ichikata. What was the deciding factor?”

Tozaburo briefly exchanged glances with his wife, who was standing next to him. “It was because...he has ‘brilliance’ as an actor. Skill is something you learn through hard work, but brilliance is something you have to be born with. I consider it another form of talent.”

“It wasn’t because your wife suggested it? Did she push for him over

Matsunosuke?” Holmes continued.

Tozaburo’s eyes widened. “Sh-She did say that, but what does it matter? The succession was not for me to decide alone. The world of theater chose him.” He waved his arms around, getting all worked up.

“Indeed. However, it’s possible that your wife doesn’t think that way. She might think that it was her own efforts that made him Kisuke Ichikata.”

Everyone gulped and looked at Tozaburo’s wife. She was a beautiful, mature woman—it was easy to tell that she was a former actress. Her face was twitching.

“I sense a sort of ‘punishment’ from this case,” Holmes continued. “Punishment for a betrayal. Did you feel betrayed by Kisuke?” he asked the wife in a soft yet stern tone.

The wife trembled and broke down into tears. “Th-That woman—she said, ‘Kisuke was complaining about being approached by an ugly old hag. He entertained her for the sake of getting ahead, but it’s disgusting how she runs wild, not knowing her place!’” She pointed at Kisuke’s fiancée as she wailed. “I-It’s not like I couldn’t tell that he only approached me because he wanted to become Kisuke Ichikata! I just didn’t mind. But his fiancée called me that! She called me a disgusting old hag!”

Um, what? My thoughts came to a grinding halt. Uhhh...so basically, Kisuke also had an affair with Tozaburo’s wife. His fiancée noticed and made that snide remark to her, saying that Kisuke was complaining about an old hag making moves on him. Tozaburo’s wife’s pride as a former actress came crumbling down, and she became a demon, thinking, “It’s thanks to me that he inherited the name! I won’t forgive him for saying that!” Right—this incident would’ve been possible for Tozaburo’s wife to pull off.

While everyone was dumbfounded, Rei leaned forward and exclaimed, “Th-That can’t be true! Kisuke’s a playboy, but he’d never speak badly about a woman. Sorry, but his fiancée was lying!”

Kisuke’s fiancée burst out laughing. “Yeah, it was a lie. I said it because I was disgusted that he’d sleep with someone so old. This old hag had the greatest look on her face when I told her that. He only slept with her for the sake of the

succession, but she misunderstood like an idiot.” Her crude laughter was a complete change from how she’d been acting up until then. Everyone was lost for words.

“Wh-Why you!” Tozaburo’s wife started towards her.

“That’s not true!” Kiskey shouted. He was so loud that everyone flinched.

What’s not true? We all thought the same thing as we looked at him.

“I didn’t have relations with her—Ayame—for the sake of the succession! I was purely attracted to her. It happened because I couldn’t hold myself back! However, I realized that she wasn’t able to hold back anymore either, so I had to cut off that doomed relationship. That’s why I rushed my engagement! This disaster happened because of my hopeless incompetence. I’m so, so sorry!” He prostrated on the ground, not caring about his injured leg.

The room fell silent again. Tozaburo took a step forward and said in a low voice, “Raise your head.” Kiskey did as he was told. Suddenly, Tozaburo’s open hand flew through the air, and a painful *smack* echoed across the room. The impact was strong enough to knock Kiskey’s upper body onto the ground.

“You absolute fool!” Tozaburo shouted, loud enough to reach outside.

“I’m so sorry! I’m well aware that apologizing isn’t enough. I won’t complain even if you exile me from the kabuki world!” Kiskey pressed his forehead against the floor.

“Do something about that leg and perform a prologue worthy of your name! Devote your body to kabuki for the rest of your life!” Tozaburo declared, his voice so powerful that it made my ears hurt.

“Y-Yes, sir!” Kiskey teared up and bowed again.

“Ayame, we’re leaving!” He wrapped his arm tightly around his unfaithful wife’s shoulder and left with her. Kiskey kept his head down as silence engulfed the room.

A little while later, we heard Tozaburo’s wife crying in the hallway. “H-Honey...I’m sorry. I really am.”

Is she okay? Worried, I peeked outside. I saw her standing stock still. Tozaburo faced away from her. His broad back radiated anger, making my knees tremble as well. After a period of silence, Tozaburo sighed deeply and slowly turned around. His wife noticeably flinched upon seeing his fierce gaze. She closed her eyes tight and braced herself, perhaps thinking that he was going to hit her.

“Before I married you, I played around recklessly too, and made many a woman cry. This must be my punishment,” Tozaburo murmured as if to himself.

“Huh?” His wife hesitantly opened her eyes.

“Ayame, I may have made you feel lonely. Sorry about that.” He bowed.

“Honey...” Her eyes widened for a second before she let out a sob, collapsing on her knees. Tozaburo silently walked forward and gently caressed her.

Wow, I thought, sincerely impressed by the chivalry of the leader of the kabuki world, who apologized and blamed himself instead of his unfaithful wife. He really was a tolerant man. *If I was in his place, would I be able to forgive her like that? Surely not.* I realized that I could never be so forgiving.

Looking back at the room, I saw Kisuke’s fiancée shrug in exasperation. “Well, as of today, this engagement is over. I managed to put up with it until now, but I can’t do this anymore. I would’ve begrudgingly accepted it if you slept with her for the sake of getting ahead, but I can’t believe you were serious about her. It was nice knowing you,” she said flatly, strutting out of the room.

“I came here today to complain, but I feel all better after getting to see an awesome show at the end. Thanks and bye,” said Airi, the next to leave. *She said it so dryly.*

“When I saw his fiancée in the lobby, I thought she was frail and pure. I never would’ve expected her to be so strong-willed,” I remarked, watching them leave without turning back.

Holmes tilted his head. “Really? I thought she was a prideful woman, and I was concerned that she wouldn’t be a good fit for Kisuke.”

That’s Holmes for you...

Kisuke was still sitting on the tatami, looking down with a grave expression on

his face.

Rei smacked him on the back. “Come on, Kisuke. What’re you waiting for? The doctor has arrived. Go get your leg fixed up and deliver a splendid prologue!” she said cheerfully.

Kisuke blushed. “R-Right!”

I felt like Rei had saved both his heart and mine.

“Yeah, don’t let it get to you, Kisuke!” Akihito said, standing next to Rei. “It’s hard to be popular. I totally get how you feel!” He nodded.

That’s Akihito for you...

8

“That was a huge mess,” I said, sighing deeply as we left Minamiza Theater and walked along the shore of the Kamo River. The sky was darkening and the wind was chilly. The path was faintly lit by the Ponto-cho riverside restaurants.

“Indeed. It was as impressive as the kabuki program itself.”

“Don’t say that, Holmes...”

“It’s rare to be able to see someone grow up so much in such a short amount of time. After today’s events, Kisuke will become a fine actor. I’m looking forward to it.” He smiled happily as he looked at the water’s surface.

Oh, so that’s what he meant. I nodded. “You’re right. Also, I’ve slightly revised my opinion of him. He can’t deceive anyone, after all. That said, his womanizing exceeded my expectations.”

“Well, he is a kabuki actor.”

“You’re saying that again... But it felt like Kisuke loved each and every one of them.” *It’s still inexcusable, though.*

“Yes, as Rei said, it’s hard to hate him. My grandfather often says, ‘A man should live how he wants, but he should take all responsibility for what he does.’ I remembered his words when I saw Kisuke today.”

It does seem like something the owner would say. Kisuke lived the way he

wanted, so now he has to take responsibility.

"I was also shocked by how tolerant Tozaburo was, forgiving his cheating wife..." I sighed hotly, remembering how he looked back then.

Holmes smiled slightly. It seemed like he was thinking something.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I was just thinking that you really are sincere. I'm black-hearted, so I didn't think of it that way."

"Huh?"

"Forgiving someone's wrongdoings gives you complete control over them."

"I-I see." *It's possible that Tozaburo was a yes-man to his wife, which means that today's incident would've reversed their roles. His wife might change into a woman who devotes herself to her husband out of gratitude. Maybe he forgave her out of self-interest. But...* "Even if it was out of self-interest, it's still amazing that he forgave her. I don't think I'd mind being controlled by someone who'd forgive me for such a huge offense," I said quietly, looking at the sunset.

Holmes made a mysterious expression before nodding and saying, "That's very like you..." He looked at his watch. "Oh, it's getting late. Shall we go for dinner? It's almost time for the reservation."

"Oh, okay," I replied, looking up. The sun had set even more in that short amount of time. The Ponto-cho lights felt like something out of a fairytale. "Anyway, a Kaomise performance followed by dinner in Ponto-cho is awfully extravagant for a show of thanks. Even though you called it a bonus, I still feel guilty." I slumped my shoulders.

Holmes's only response was a wry smile. After a moment of silence, he asked as though he'd just remembered, "Come to think of it, did you go to that mixer you mentioned before?"

"Huh?" I blinked. *What mixer?* Suddenly, I remembered the one my classmate had invited me to. "Oh, I turned that down a long time ago. I wasn't interested in the first place, and besides, I had to study."

"I see... Of course you did." He smiled with a sigh of relief.

Why would he ask that now...? I tilted my head. *Was he worried about me?*
“Thank you for your concern,” I said politely.

Holmes looked confused. “Of course...” he murmured quietly. He then looked up, as if pulling himself together. He turned around and declared, “Aoi, after dinner, it’s back to intense studying at Kura. I want you to get good grades on your next tests.”

“O-Okay!” I nodded.

“But before that, let’s eat a lot of delicious food.”

“Yes, I’m excited.”

We chuckled and smiled at each other as we headed deeper into Ponto-cho.

My first Kaomise was a wonderful, moving performance followed by an incident that showed me human love, hate, and growth—it was a passionate winter sunset that I’d never forget.

Chapter 2: Tears and a Broken Alibi on the Holy Night

1

"I...I can't believe this," I whispered. I couldn't believe the results of my end-of-year tests. My parents told me I had to quit my job if I did poorly this time, so I studied harder and even had Holmes tutor me. As a result, I felt fairly confident...but I never would've expected *this* much of an improvement. Holmes said the target was twenty points per subject, but of course that was impossible. Still, my grades this time were the best I'd ever gotten.

"Aoi, you must've worked very hard," my mother said, looking at my report card as we sat in the living room. She sounded pleased, but she also murmured, "I can't believe it."

"Y-Yeah. I didn't want to quit my job..." I answered awkwardly. I was surprised too.

My mother furrowed her brows. "Aoi..."

"Y-Yes?"

"I'm not trying to doubt you, but to be honest, it's very unusual to be able to improve your grades so much so quickly, right?" She placed my report card on the table and looked me straight in the eye. It was the look of a parent scolding a naughty child. *She might think that I was so desperate to keep my job that I cheated on the tests.* From her perspective, I was still working just as much as before. I didn't spend extra time studying in my room, and I didn't go to cram school. So, she didn't know how it was possible. *I don't like being suspected, but it's true that my grades are so out of character that she's right to doubt me.*

"I didn't cheat or anything," I declared flatly.

My mother didn't say anything. Her expression softened, but she still didn't

seem to accept it.

“S-Someone at work felt responsible for my grades and helped me study,” I said quietly. I felt nervous for some reason.

My mother gaped. “Your coworker tutored you?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Do they know how to be a tutor?”

“Y-Yes. They’re a grad student at Kyoto U, so...” *Come to think of it, I never told my mother about my workplace.* I gave simple explanations when necessary, like when we went on an overnight trip to appraise Akihito’s aunt’s antiques, or when I went to see a kabuki show as a bonus. But I never explained how I ended up working there or who I was working with. It all started because of my own dishonesty, after all.

“R-Really?! That’s amazing!” she squeaked, immediately understanding everything. *I should’ve told her that from the start,* I thought, shrugging my shoulders. *Kyoto U really is a powerful name.* “But, that grad student is also a part-timer, right? Why did they feel responsible?” she pressed.

I clammed up. “U-Umm, how do I put this...?” *Where do I begin...?*

First, I told her about Kura and the Yagashira family. The owner—a famous, nationally certified appraiser, the manager—a historical fiction author, and Holmes, the owner’s apprentice and grandson.

My mother listened to my summary earnestly. “Hmm, that’s an interesting family.” She nodded, intrigued. “Seiji Yagashira... I haven’t heard of him, but your late grandfather might’ve known him. He loved antiques, after all,” she murmured to herself, folding her arms.

I guess the owner’s name doesn’t have an effect on people from Kanto. “Y-Yeah, he might’ve. The owner seems to be well known in Kansai. Anyway, it’s thanks to Holmes that my grades went up. They didn’t go down because of work in the first place.”

“Holmes?” My mother tilted her head.

“I-It’s a nickname. He’s perceptive like Sherlock Holmes, plus his surname is

Yagashira.”

“Oh, I see. Because it has the character for ‘home’ in it,” she said, immediately understanding again. *I think I can understand how Holmes feels every time he gives that explanation.* “So, it’s because of this ‘Holmes’ fellow that you got such good grades?” She picked up my report card and giggled.

“Y-Yes.”

“I’d like to thank him, then.”

“Huh?”

“Invite him over sometime—only if he wants to, of course. Your grades improved so much because of his tutoring, and he took you to see the Kaomise. He must’ve helped you with other things too, right? Ask when’s a good time for him.” She leaned forward, smiling.

My face stiffened. The idea of inviting Holmes to our house felt strange. *What will he think?* Suddenly, I remembered something he said: “I’m interested in your grandfather’s collection. I’d like to appraise it sometime.” *This could be a good chance to get my grandfather’s antiques appraised.* I was still embarrassed and hesitant about it, but I nodded and said that I would.

2

The next day, I visited Kura on my way home from school.

Ueda was sitting at the counter. “Oh, so he didn’t wanna get married to begin with, huh?” He sighed, disappointed. Apparently they’d been talking about the hanging scroll that Ueda had brought in. Holmes had told him that his father wasn’t being considerate—he simply didn’t want to remarry.

“I actually set that guy up for a marriage meeting a while back,” Ueda said.

“You did?” Holmes seemed surprised.

“Uh huh.” Ueda nodded.

I’d heard about it from the manager already, but apparently Holmes hadn’t.

“There was a great woman who was a big fan of his—real pretty and graceful.

Just like him, her spouse passed away and her kids are already grown up. It doesn't get better than that, right? So, I got him to meet her and didn't tell him it was a marriage meeting until after the fact. Then, he said, 'Sorry, but I'll have to decline.' Now why would he do that? It's a darn shame," Ueda said disdainfully, resting his chin in his hands.

"Now, now." Holmes chuckled from across the counter. "Please leave him be. If my father wants to remarry, he'll do so without anyone's meddling."

"You think so?"

"Yes. The men of the Yagashira family are stubborn, so we won't do anything we're told to unless we agree with it." His words were extremely convincing. Ueda and I inadvertently exchanged glances and nodded in understanding.

"Well, all right." Ueda turned back to Holmes and clapped his hand. "So about what I was saying before, can you do it?"

Holmes silently looked down and started checking the inventory list.

"Completely ignoring me, huh?" Ueda pouted.

I tilted my head. "Did you ask Holmes to do something for you, Ueda?" Since I'd just arrived, I didn't know what they were talking about before. *What did he ask for?*

"Uh huh. You tell him too, Aoi. He won't do me a favor even though I helped him out last time."

"What...?" Holmes furrowed his brow. "That has nothing to do with this."

"What's the favor?" I asked.

"I'm opening a store and I want Holmes to stand outside the entrance for just a week. He's good-looking, right? He'd make a great poster boy." Ueda framed Holmes's face in his hands.

"What's the point in making me stand there for a week when I'm not going to be working there regularly? Besides, I'm busy with university and this store. I don't have time to help with another store." Exasperated, Holmes turned to the side and shooed Ueda's hands away.

I see his point. Juggling university and Kura was enough work as it was, and I

didn't think there was any point in helping Ueda with his store for just a week.

"My shop's got a good atmosphere once you go in, and the quality's good too. I know people are gonna become repeat visitors. I just need someone at the start to pull people in, like a panda at a zoo. C'mon, Holmes, be my panda."

"Please don't blatantly call me a panda." Holmes quickly turned away. *Since he's stubborn, it'll be hard to win him over.*

"What kind of store are you opening, Ueda?" I asked.

Despite appearances, Ueda was a skilled businessman. He took part in a variety of operations based in Osaka, ranging from management consulting to customs clearance services. His outfit today made it clear that he was successful—a high-quality Italian suit, a platinum watch, and shoes polished to a shine.

"A trend-following dessert cafe."

"Trend-following?"

"Yeah, trends change all the time, right? Crepes to waffles, bagels to pancakes. So, the plan is to always keep up with the latest fads in sweets and desserts."

"Oh, that's a nice idea."

"Also, all of the staff will be good-looking guys. You could say we serve eye candy too."

"E-Eye candy..."

"So, I want to get Holmes in there, even if it's just for the start."

"I-I see." I completely understood now. *A cafe where good-looking young men serve you popular desserts... I can see why Ueda wants to include Holmes. The image of Holmes carrying a tray of desserts was too perfect.*

"I'm begging you, Holmes! You're Teramachi-Sanjo's panda—I mean, hottest guy!"

"I'm flattered, but no," Holmes answered decisively without hesitation.

"Don't be so heartless! Oh right, it's almost Christmas, y'know? I'll pay you top dollar!"

“Believe it or not, I’m working very hard. I don’t need your pay. Besides, how could I abandon my own store to drive up the profits of someone else’s?” Holmes smiled coldly.

Ueda’s face stiffened. “You’re a nasty guy.”

“You just realized?”

“No, I already knew.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. They really were close. It was as if they were family.

“Okay then, how about this? When you’re at my store, you can even shill Kura. Be like, ‘I’m only here temporarily—normally I work at an antique store in Teramachi-Sanjo. We have all sorts of miscellaneous goods too, so you should stop by!’ It’s a chance to get new customers.”

Holmes paused. Apparently that didn’t seem like such a bad idea. “A week is a long time, though. I’d have to go to Osaka every day, right?”

“Oh, it ain’t in Osaka. The store’s gonna be in Kyoto, on Kitayama Street,” Ueda said smoothly.

“Kitayama Street?!” Holmes and I exclaimed in unison.

Kitayama Street is even farther north than North Oji Street. It’s a stylish, exotic street lined with Western-style buildings, churches, and trees—not what you’d expect to find in Kyoto. *By the way, it’s also close to where I live.*

“I see,” Holmes said, folding his arms. “That’s a good place for a cafe. It’s an artsy neighborhood close to a botanical garden and a concert hall. I see you’re an expert at your trade.”

“Well, yeah. Oh right, didn’t you say you wanted to turn this place into a cafe one day? It’ll be a good experience for you.”

“Well, I don’t mind helping if it’s on Kitayama Street. A week is still too long, though.”

“All right, we’ll make it five days! How’s that?” Ueda opened his hand to represent the number five.

“Three days. That’s my limit.” Holmes held up three fingers.

“Four days, then! Right in the middle! It’s a done deal!” Ueda clapped his hands.

Ueda...

“Fine, four days.” Holmes gave a defeated sigh.

“All right, now that that’s settled, can you come over Saturday evening? I want you to see the place. I’ll let Takeshi know what’s up.”

“Fine...”

“Thanks, Holmes. I’ll pay you top dollar.” Ueda merrily drank his coffee.

“No, you don’t need to pay me. You’re always helping me, so I’d like to offer my assistance free of charge.” Holmes smiled brightly, as if he were an innocent boy. For some reason, it made me shudder.

Ueda stiffened, as though he felt the same way. “I see... ‘Nothing costs more than what’s received for free.’ You’re a sneaky one.”

“Not as much as you, Ueda. Don’t worry, I’ll do my work properly,” Holmes said smoothly, looking back down at the inventory list.

“I know you will. Once you’ve taken something on, you always do a bang-up job of it. I feel like I’m gonna be in debt for a while.” Ueda sighed. “Anyway, I gotta run. See you Saturday.” He left the store.

With Ueda gone, the store felt even quieter than usual. I could hear the clock going *tick, tock*.

Holmes looked up as if he remembered something. “Come to think of it, how were your test results, Aoi?”

“O-Oh!” I straightened my posture. “I was just about to report on that!”

“Aoi, this isn’t the military. But based on your mood today, they were satisfactory, right?” *I was smiling before he even asked.*

“Yes, they were the highest scores I’ve ever gotten. My ranking shot up so much that my mother suspected me of cheating.”

“Really?” He looked worried.

I hurriedly shook my head. “It’s okay. I told her that I was tutored by a grad

student from Kyoto U, and she let me off the hook.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“A-And she said she wanted you to come over so she could thank you,” I said nervously.

Holmes’s eyes widened. “There’s no need for that. It’s our fault your grades fell in the first place.”

“N-No, that’s not true. B-But you wouldn’t want to, right? I’ll tell her that you’re too busy. I just wanted you to know how thankful she was,” I said quickly, feeling awkward.

“Come to think of it, your grandfather left many antiques and hanging scrolls at your house, right?” Holmes placed his hand on his chin.

“Y-Yes.”

“I did want to see them, so would you allow me to take her up on that offer?”

“O-Of course. She said we can fit it into your schedule.”

“How about next Saturday, then? I have to go to Ueda’s cafe in the evening, so sometime before that.”

“I-I think that’ll be fine. Saturday afternoon, then.”

“Would you like to come to see Ueda’s cafe with me afterwards?”

“Yes, of course.”

“In that case, I’ll drop by your house at around 2 p.m. and we’ll go to Ueda’s cafe after.”

“O-Okay.”

“I’m excited to see your family’s collection.”

“It’s probably full of fakes, but thank you.” I bowed.

3

Then it was Saturday. Just before 2 p.m., I was heading out to the nearest bus stop to fetch Holmes.

“Okay, I’m going now.” As I was putting on my shoes, my mother came running from the kitchen.

“A-Are you sure a Baikal apple pie will be okay?” she asked. Baikal is a dessert store local to Kyoto.

“Y-Yeah. He said before that he likes them, so it should be all right. You don’t have to make a fuss.”

“R-Really? Okay, you can go now. Don’t keep the teacher waiting.”

“O-Okay. He’s not a teacher, though.” *Apparently, my mother was fully imagining him as a tutor from Kyoto U.* I smiled awkwardly and left.

The bus stop was about ten minutes away. I walked quickly, energized by the bright rays of the sun. The winter air was a bit chilly, but since it was a sunny day, it still felt nice and warm. When I arrived at the bus stop, Holmes was already there, as expected. He was leaning against a wall, looking at a small notebook.

“Holmes!” I jogged over.

Holmes smiled. “Hello, Aoi.”

“Were you waiting long?”

“No, not at all.”

“Sorry for always keeping you waiting. I tried to come early this time.”

“It still isn’t 2 p.m. yet, so it’s fine. Is your house this way?”

“Yes. My mother is eagerly waiting.”

“Now I’m getting nervous,” he said as we walked.

That surprised me. *Even Holmes gets nervous, huh?*

“It’s off-putting that she suddenly wants to thank you, right?”

“No, that’s not it. I’m just afraid that even though you don’t have to quit your job anymore, she’ll meet me and think, ‘I can’t let my daughter work with such a black-hearted person,’” he said with a serious face.

I almost burst out laughing. “I-It’s okay. You don’t look black-hearted at all at

first glance.”

“No, I may be able to fool people our age, but there are many aspects of me that adults can see through. My father, grandfather, and Ueda all know that I’m black-hearted.”

“That’s because they’ve known you for a long time. I think you can trick most people, regardless of age or gender. Have some confidence in yourself. You look like a great person on the outside. Not black-hearted at all,” I insisted.

Holmes made a complicated expression and chuckled. “Thank you...but that was rather harsh.”

“Y-You’re right. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. Your honesty puts me at ease.”

“Huh?”

“Ever since we first met, you’ve been completely open with me. I think that’s why I never had to put up a wall between us.” *Come to think of it, Holmes often said things to me that he supposedly wouldn’t have said to anyone else. Maybe it’s because I behaved so shamefully when we first met that he subconsciously didn’t feel the need to keep up appearances.*

We continued chatting as we walked. When we were almost at my house, I started feeling a bit nervous as well. Our conversation naturally died down.

“Is your whole family home?” Holmes asked.

I looked up. “My grandmother went on a trip for seniors to eat snow crab, and my dad is golfing with people from his company.”

“So those two are absent.”

“Yes. Oh, over there.” My house was in a completely ordinary residential neighborhood—one of many houses crammed tightly together.

“Your house is on the large side,” Holmes said upon seeing it.

I choked on my breath. “Wh-What?!”

“You’re always saying it’s small.”

“I-It *is*! Compared to the Yagashira estate, it’s like a hamster cage!”

“That building is also Seiji Yagashira’s art gallery, so it can’t be compared to normal houses. Most homes in Kyoto are small, so I’d consider yours on the large side.”

The old house built by my grandparents took up almost the entire lot, only leaving room for a parking space. In that sense, our house might be slightly bigger than the ones around it. That said, it’s still a completely ordinary house. Still, I did feel slightly relieved. Now I didn’t have to be embarrassed about Holmes seeing my tiny, old house.

I excitedly opened the front door and shouted, “I-I’m back!” I heard the sounds of hurried footsteps coming from all directions.

“Mom, Aoi’s back!” my younger brother shouted from the second floor.

“I-I know!” my mother shouted back from the kitchen.

Why are they so loud?! This is embarrassing!

Standing next to me, Holmes chuckled.

The first person to show up was my younger brother, who is in his second year of middle school. Since the stairs were right next to the entrance, we could see him coming down.

“Oh, hey there, Aoi,” he said, clearly not actually caring about me. He looked at Holmes and stopped in his tracks.

“Nice to meet you,” Holmes said with a smile. “I’m Kiyotaka Yagashira.”

My brother’s face reddened in the blink of an eye. “I-I’m Mutsuki Mashiro,” he said awkwardly, stiff with nervousness.

Then, my mother swooped in. “Why, hello there. I’m Aoi’s mother.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Kiyotaka Yagashira.” Holmes bowed.

Just like my brother, my mother froze too. “Wait, Aoi! You didn’t tell me he was going to be this charming!”

“R-Right?!” my brother exclaimed. “I was surprised too! You said he was a grad student at Kyoto U, so I was imagining some super-serious guy!”

“Exactly!”

“G-Geez, calm down,” I scolded them, blushing furiously. “Anyway, please come in, Holmes.”

“Thank you.” He came inside and crouched to take off his shoes and line them up neatly. My mother and brother gasped at his smooth, elegant movements. *You’re staring too much, guys!*

“Take a seat first, and we can have tea,” I said. We went to the living room to sit down on the sofa. There were flowers on the table that weren’t usually there.

“I know it’s nothing special to you since it’s from Shimogamo, but I brought sweets from one of my favorite bakeries. Please share them with the family, if you’d like,” Holmes said before sitting down. He took a box out of a paper bag and held it out with both hands. The box had the French word “Lamartine” on it.

“Why, thank you, Mr. Yagashira. This is that fancy bakery on Main Street, right? I’ve been curious, but I’ve never had a chance to go. I heard from Aoi that you like Baikal’s apple pie, so...” My mother placed plates of apple pie on the table.

“Thank you very much. I do love Baikal’s apple pie. But, er, could you not call me ‘Mr. Yagashira’? Just ‘Kiyotaka’ will be fine.”

“Oh dear, I’m sorry. It just slipped out.” She still had it in her head that Holmes was my teacher. “Kiyotaka, then. I also bought this—I thought you might like it.” She eagerly placed some *mame daifuku*—rice cakes stuffed with beans—on the table. *Is this really something to get excited over?* I wondered, feeling somewhat disappointed.

I glanced at Holmes, whose eyes were wide open.

“This is Demachi Futaba’s *mame mochi*, right?!” he exclaimed.

“Yes, from the Demachi shopping district.”

Huh?

“I’m delighted. You waited in line for these just for me? Thank you so much.”

“Yes, the line is always so long.”

“Which line were you in?”

“I was lucky and there were only two lines when I went today. It turned into three before long, though.”

“It goes up to four lines during the busy season, right? Demachi Futaba’s *mame mochi* is such a treat.”

“I’m glad you think so. My friend from our neighborhood told me that anyone from Kyoto would be sure to love it.”

“Yes, of course. Oh, and I love the apple pie too.”

Holmes and my mother were strangely excited. Apparently the *mame daifuku* that my mother bought from the Demachi shopping district was actually called *mame mochi*. It seemed to be very popular in Kyoto.

After getting some formalities out of the way, it was time for tea.

“Oh, this *mame mochi* really is good.”

“The mochi is soft, the beans are flaky, and the bean paste is delightfully sweet. I’m so happy—I wasn’t expecting to be able to eat *mame mochi* today.”

“Aoi, these cookies are really good!”

“The apple pie is delicious too. It’s been a while since I last had it.”

Thanks to the sweets, everyone was talking really openly. *Kyoto sweets are a force to be reckoned with.*

“We’ve heard all about your heroic tales as ‘Holmes,’” my mother said while refilling our teacups.

“What?” Holmes’s eyes widened. “Heroic tales?”

My brother nodded firmly. “Like how you solved the mystery of the manga artist’s tea bowl at Ninna Temple, and the mystery of the hanging scrolls at Mount Kurama!”

“Yes, and you exposed the culprit when an antique was broken at your grandfather’s birthday party,” my mother added.

“Oh, oh! There was Kisuke Ichikata’s womanizing too!”

“You really are amazing!”

My mother and brother spoke merrily.

R-Right, after telling them about my workplace, they were curious about why Holmes was called “Holmes,” and I ended up telling them everything. Well, it’s more like they kept asking for more, so I was forced to.

“No, those were all just coincidences,” Holmes said unconvincingly.

“May I consult with you if I get caught up in something?”

“Me too!” my brother said.

I just about spit out my tea. “That’s enough! You’re not going to get caught up in cases that easily.”

“Oh, you never know,” my mother said. “It’s not like those cases were murders or anything.”

“Yeah, small things can happen to anyone!”

Holmes smiled. “I don’t know if I’d be of any use, but I’d be glad to help.”

My mother and brother gasped in awe and blushed. His smile was so radiant you’d think there was a halo over his head. *You really didn’t need to worry, Holmes. You aren’t giving off the slightest hint of black-heartedness right now, I* whispered in my heart.

Afterwards, my mother kept trying to offer him something as thanks and he kept declining. I decided that we should go to my room.

We climbed the stairs and walked to the end of the hall. “Sorry she’s so stubborn, Holmes. This is my room.” I opened the door. My room was about the size of six tatami mats, with a bed, desk, bookshelf, chest of drawers, and a small table with cushions around it. There was also an old-fashioned storage nook that I hung a cute curtain over, disguising it as a normal closet. My carpet and bedsheets were both light green, while my window curtains were yellow. I’d done my best to clean up before Holmes came, but it was still a decades-old house. I couldn’t hide how worn out the ceiling and walls were, which was a bit embarrassing.

“It has a lovely, bright color scheme.”

“Th-Thanks. I’ll go get something for us to drink, so please have a seat.”

“I already drank a lot, so I’ll be fine,” Holmes said, sitting down on one of the cushions I’d prepared. He leaned back against my bed.

“Oh, okay.” *Right—we were having tea this whole time.*

The moment I stopped walking, Holmes placed his hand on his forehead and sighed deeply.

“Wh-What’s wrong? Did my mother’s relentless thanking spree tire you out?”

“No, it’s just that I really was nervous.”

“Wh-What?” *It didn’t look that way.*

“Was that okay? Do you think she noticed anything?”

“N-No, you were very likeable! I’m impressed!” I clenched my fists.

Holmes laughed. “Thanks, that’s a relief,” he said, reverting to his Kyoto accent with a carefree grin. Caught off guard, my heart skipped a beat.

He took a deep breath, saying, “I feel calmer now.” He looked around my room again. “The room of a girl living with her family certainly is different from the room of a woman who lives by herself. It’s sort of refreshing—and nostalgic.”

“Um, do you often go to the rooms of women who live alone?”

“Oh, no. I mean, not with just the two of us, but with my university friends,” he hastily corrected himself. I couldn’t help but laugh. *Did he think I was going to say, “You say you don’t have a girlfriend, but you’re going to women’s houses? Jerk!” or something?*

“You’re an adult, so there’s nothing strange about going to a woman’s house, right? You don’t have to panic like that,” I said, giggling.

Holmes slumped his shoulders. He had a complicated expression on his face.

“Also, when you said ‘nostalgic,’ were you recalling Izumi’s room?”

“No... I never went into Izumi’s room.”

“Wait, really?”

“I’ve been to her house, but we only had tea in the living room or parlor. Her parents were very strict, so they didn’t approve of her being alone in her room with the opposite sex while she was still in high school.”

“I-I see. That’s too bad.”

“Yes. However, back then, I was trying my hardest to show off to her, so I said responsible things like, ‘Let’s listen to your parents and have tea in the living room’ even though I really didn’t mean it.”

I burst out laughing. “You say you were trying to show off back then, but do you not do that anymore?”

“My showing off resulted in getting completely dumped, so...” He chuckled.

I suddenly felt bad and shrank in my seat. “S-Sorry.”

“Don’t be. Oh right, her house isn’t very far from here. It was in Matsugasaki.”

“Oh, I see. You’re right, that’s not far.” It wasn’t close either, though. Matsugasaki was farther north from my neighborhood, Shimogamo. I had the impression that it was a rich neighborhood, like Okazaki or Kinugasa. *Although Shimogamo is also considered a rich neighborhood, my house aside.* She might’ve been from a wealthy family, considering how strict her parents were.

“It’s strange, though. She was from such a strict family, and yet...” *Once she started university, she was immediately seduced by a playboy at a group date.* I clammed up, unable to finish my sentence.

“Well, it just goes to show how oppressed she felt. Her parents and even her boyfriend were straitlaced, so it might’ve been stifling for her. When I look back at it now, I think it was only natural,” Holmes said calmly, seeming to have realized what I was thinking.

“But considering how perceptive you are, you could’ve figured out how she felt and did something about it...” I frowned, having a hard time understanding how their relationship turned out the way it did.

Holmes chuckled lightly. “Aoi, I may be rather clever, but I’m completely useless when romantic feelings are involved.”

“What do you mean?”

“When feelings and expectations come into the picture, I can’t make calm decisions and analyses anymore. Even I think that it would’ve gone a bit better if I’d been my usual self.”

“O-Oh...” That was unexpected. Then again, people often say that everyone slips up when it comes to themselves. No matter how high-performance a computer is, it’ll still break if you spill sweet syrup on it. I always wondered how that could happen to someone so perceptive, but I guess that’s why his relationship with Izumi failed. I nodded, finally understanding.

“It wasn’t just Izumi. There was another time when I thought a girl had a crush on me because of her behavior, but it turned out that that wasn’t the case.” He shrugged.

“Th-That even happens to you? How did you know that you were wrong?”

He hesitated before answering, “People mistook us for a couple, and she seemed extremely bothered by that. She strongly denied it.”

“O-Oh... That’s a shame.” If she did like him, she would’ve been happy about that misunderstanding.

“Yes, apparently I was just being vain. It was unfortunate.” Holmes smiled wryly.

I nodded, not knowing what to say. I really never would’ve expected Holmes to have these problems. “Oh, but if you thought it was unfortunate, does that mean you wanted to be in a relationship again?” I looked him in the eye, but he immediately averted his gaze.

“Who knows?” He seemed to have mixed feelings. Somehow, I knew exactly how he felt. When Kaori asked me that same question, I couldn’t answer either. *It’s like if you see a field of flowers on the other side of a river and you want to roll around in them, but you’ve nearly drowned in a river before, so you can’t bring yourself to say, “I want to go to the flowers.”*

While I was lost in thought, Holmes whispered, “Whenever I hold myself back, I get an unexpected response that throws me for a loop...”

I came back to my senses. “Huh?”

Holmes smiled weakly. “It’s nothing. In the end, it’s difficult for a man to understand a woman’s heart.”

“Oh...” *No matter how smart you are, romantic feelings don’t always go the way you want them to. Maybe that’s just how the world works.*

Holmes looked up. “Oh right, Aoi. Could I see your grandfather’s collection?” he said, as if he’d just remembered.

“Sure. It’s on the first floor. Do you want to see it right now?”

“Yes.” We stood up, left my room, and headed for the first floor.

Mutsuki poked his face in and asked, “Aoi, are you going outside?” Apparently he was extremely curious about us.

“No, he’s going to take a look at Grandpa’s collection for us.”

We entered a Japanese-style room. On the shelves were vases, tea bowls, and hanging scrolls rolled up like a ninja’s hand scroll.

“There are also things in wooden boxes in the storage room,” I said, opening the door to reveal many piles of boxes.

“I see. He really did love antiques, then. May I begin?”

“Yes, please do.”

Holmes quickly took his white gloves out of his inner pocket and carefully examined each and every tea bowl and plate. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

“This was Grandpa’s most prized hanging scroll,” I said, picking up a scroll from the shelf with my gloved hands. “He was always bragging about how it has Hokusai’s signature on it...” I unrolled the scroll, revealing a beautiful Hokusai painting of Mount Fuji.

“Ah, this is the work of Hokusai’s pupil,” Holmes said calmly as he checked it.

“The pupil signed his teacher’s name?” I asked, perplexed.

“Yes.” Holmes nodded. “Hokusai changed his alias several times, giving his past names to his pupils. Also, since they started learning ukiyo-e by copying

their teacher, their painting styles are very similar. So, it's only natural for there to be works by his pupils that have his name on them."

"In other words, this was by a pupil who inherited his name. That's kind of confusing."

"Indeed. As I've explained before, ukiyo-e involves a carver, a printer, a paper craftsman, and so on, so it can be considered the most difficult type of art to appraise. There's a famous story called 'The Shunpoan Incident' that describes how difficult it is." He cast his eyes down, seeming dejected.

"What's that?" I tilted my head.

"In the ninth year of the Showa period, there was a huge discovery of hand-painted ukiyo-e by Sharaku and Hokusai. As I said, hand-painted ukiyo-e are one-of-a-kind—they aren't prints. They would be incredibly valuable nowadays.

"It was said that Sharaku's original paintings had all been destroyed in a great earthquake, but a family of noble descent who called themselves Shunpoan revealed that they were in possession of them. A renowned appraiser named Professor Rinpu Sasagawa determined that the paintings were genuine, and it was considered the discovery of the century. They would've been worth the equivalent of hundreds of millions of yen.

"However, it was later found that they were all counterfeits that had been forged by a certain nefarious group. The professor's reputation hit rock bottom. The world criticized him for being too lenient with his appraisal, but for those in the business, it gives us chills—that could be any one of us tomorrow. Ukiyo-e are incredibly difficult to appraise. Even a Hokusai painting at an influential museum could later be proved to be a fake."

"I see." I nodded.

"There are three criteria by which we judge hand-painted ukiyo-e: the seal, its history, and the painting style.

"The seal refers to the name and stamp on the painting. In other words, the signature.

"History refers to the work's origin. Rather than its appearance, we judge based on whose possession it has been in. It's believed that the decision made

in the Shunpoan Scandal was heavily influenced by the fact that the paintings came from a noble family.

“Lastly, there’s the painting style. However, an artist’s pupils had permission to copy his work. In the extreme case of Hokusai, he even gave them his aliases.”

“I-It does sound difficult when you put it that way,” I remarked.

“Yes. However, this is unmistakably the work of Hokusai’s pupil. Since it’s a reprint, I’d say it’s worth around ten thousand yen.” He smiled as he held the scroll.

I nodded. “It’s unfortunate that it wasn’t his own, but I’m glad I got to hear an interesting story. About Sharaku—does that mean his original paintings no longer exist?”

“In 2008, an original Sharaku Toshusai painting on a folding fan was found on the island of Corfu in Greece. It was a major discovery.”

“Wh-What? Why was it found in Greece?”

“Apparently, a Greek ambassador had spent the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth spending all of his fortune on Asian art. His collection was stored on a small island. It remained there untouched for around a century and was only discovered in recent years. There were many other valuable works of art there besides Sharaku’s. My grandfather and I were also extremely excited by the news.”

I nodded, intrigued.

“Also, this discovery revealed Sharaku’s secret—until then, he was called ‘the mysterious artist.’”

“He was?”

“Yes. Sharaku appeared suddenly in the Edo period, released a great number of revolutionary ukiyo-e, and then abruptly disappeared after only ten months. No one knew his true identity.”

“That *is* mysterious.” I nodded. As I was putting the hanging scroll away, I noticed another one hidden at the back of the shelf. “Oh, there’s another one

here.” I reached out to grab it. “I’m sure this one’s fake too.”

“We won’t know until we see it. Allow me,” Holmes said, opening the scroll. He blinked upon seeing it. “Well then... You might not want to look at this, Aoi.”

“Huh?” I turned around and was rendered speechless. The painting was rather obscene... It was a *shunga*—an erotic ukiyo-e. “O-Oh no, why did Grandpa have something like this?!” *That must be why it was hidden.* I was so embarrassed I couldn’t look up from the floor.

“Well, this is art too—it provides clues to the culture of the past. This one is by Utamaro.”

“I-Is it his pupil’s?” I asked, still looking away.

“No, it’s his own work. I believe it was produced by Juzaburo Tsutaya,” Holmes said, carefully rolling the *shunga*.

Relieved that I didn’t have to see it anymore, I regained my senses and asked, “Who’s that?”

“A merchant from the Edo period. He started out with a small bookstore and became the leading publisher of his time in just ten years. He had a real knack for business.”

“I see.” I nodded firmly. “He was amazing, huh?”

“Yes. It’s said that he was ahead of his time with his innovative ideas.”

“Like what?”

“Let’s see... For example, Tsutaya produced guides to the red-light district.”

“Guides?”

“Yes. His guidebooks that listed the names of each establishment’s courtesans were apparently very popular.”

In modern terms, it’d be like those listings magazines in the sex industry... “Th- That’s certainly amazing, considering the era...”

“Innovative, right? He was also mindful of trends—if satirical poems were popular, he’d publish books of satirical poems. Another incredible thing he did was invest in talented young artists by lodging them in his own house and

spending money on their training. Thanks to him, the world was graced with many wonderful artists such as Utamaro and Sharaku.”

“W-Wow,” I murmured, impressed. He invested money in the growth of others, who then brought him profit. If he guessed wrong then he would’ve lost money, but I’m sure he was generous enough to not let that stop him. He really was amazing.

“This *shunga* is also proof of his business sense. The woman in this painting hasn’t completely taken off her kimono,” he said, placing his hand on top of the rolled-up scroll. I shyly nodded. From the quick glimpse I’d gotten earlier, the woman wasn’t completely naked—her kimono was open in front and turned over.

“He actually had partnerships with kimono stores. That’s why many *shunga* have women wearing kimono.”

I blinked in surprise. “O-Oh!” I exclaimed loudly. *Now that he mentions it, all of the shunga I’ve glimpsed before had the woman’s kimono still on. I didn’t know it was because of kimono store partnerships! The goal must’ve been for men to buy the same kimono to give to women.*

“Sly, right?” Holmes smiled.

I nodded eagerly. *By the way, Holmes considers the word “sly” a compliment.*

“Oh right, going back to what I was saying about Sharaku, there were many theories about his identity—some thought he was an alias of Hokusai or a Noh actor. Some even speculated that he was the publisher Tsutaya himself.”

“Tsutaya himself? Really?”

“Yes. However, now it seems like the Noh actor is the most plausible. At the time, Noh actors were of the same importance as samurai, so they were forbidden to have secondary jobs. So, it’s believed that he may have been working in secret. Tsutaya was only the producer.”

“So basically, Tsutaya produced a Noh actor who was a talented artist under the name of Sharaku?”

“Most likely, yes.”

“He really was capable, huh?”

“Yes, I think he may have been the greatest connoisseur and businessman in Edo. Oh right, the reason why Ueda likes ukiyo-e is out of respect for Tsutaya,” Holmes said, putting the hanging scroll into a box.

“Oh, I see.” It all made sense now.

Afterwards, we checked the rest of my grandfather’s collection.

“They’re all nice works, but none of them have value as antiques,” Holmes said.

I gave a small nod. “That’s what I thought.” My time at Kura had improved my eyes, and I vaguely sensed that the collection at home wouldn’t be worth much.

“That means that you really are amazing, Aoi.”

“Huh?”

“Out of all of these, you picked the Zen priest Hakuin’s hanging scroll to bring to Kura. I was right—you do have an eye for this,” Holmes said earnestly as he organized the collection.

“Th-That was just a fluke. Oh right, we should be heading to Ueda’s shop now, right?” I said, checking the clock on the wall.

“Yes,” Holmes said, nodding and standing up.

4

My mother and brother gave me and Holmes an enthusiastic send-off as we left the house. We headed towards Kitayama Street, which was about a twenty-minute walk away. It would’ve been faster to take public transit, but we decided to walk instead since we’d eaten so many sweets.

When we got close to Kitayama Station, Holmes looked up and remarked, “The roadside trees have lost all of their leaves, but the ones in the botanical garden are still colorful.” He was referring to the Kyoto Botanical Garden.

Led by his words, I looked over too. Even from outside, I could see many colorful trees. “You’re right.”

“Do you often go to the botanical garden, Aoi? It’s near your house,” he asked as we walked.

I shook my head. “No, I’ve never been there.”

“What?” Holmes’s eyes widened in clear surprise, startling me.

“Um, is that weird?”

“It’s more of a shame. You have such a wonderful garden near you and yet you’ve never visited. It’s an enormous, twenty-four-hectare lot filled with plants from all seasons. Beautiful flower beds, Western-style gardens, tropical plant greenhouses, and plenty of facilities, all for the low entrance fee of two hundred yen. Oh, and since you’re in high school, you should be able to get in for one hundred and fifty. It’s the perfect place for a stroll—perhaps if you want a diversion from your thoughts. While I’m at it, the annual pass is only one thousand yen. I buy it every year,” he declared, taking his annual pass out of his wallet to show me.

My face stiffened. *Here we go again. I thought he was an ambassador for Kyoto and art, but I guess he’s also interested in facilities like this. Now that I think about it, he does like flowers too.*

Two hundred yen (one hundred and fifty for me) or one thousand for the annual pass. That is cheap. It might be nice to take a walk through the flowers. Since it’s twenty-four hectares, it’s bound to be good exercise too.

“How big is twenty-four hectares anyway? I can’t really imagine it.”

“Hmm. People often use Tokyo Dome for scale, so around five of those?”

“To be honest, I can’t really think in terms of Tokyo Dome either. How many tatami mats is that?”

“About a hundred and forty-four thousand.”

“A hundred and...” *Nope, no idea.*

“At this point, the best way would be to experience it with your own feet.” Holmes chuckled.

“You’re right.” I shrugged.

“Furthermore, the environment here is excellent.” He stopped walking and turned to look back. Near the botanical garden was a concert hall. The street was lined with trees, and there were stylish Western-style cafes and restaurants, variety stores, a church, and a wedding hall. *No wonder it’s called a modern and fashionable street.* Kitayama Street was very unlike the image most people have of Kyoto. If you showed someone a picture of this area and said it was Kobe, they might even believe you.

“Ueda’s cafe is diagonally across from the botanical garden, between those two streets,” Holmes said as we crossed the street.

“That’s a really good location, right?”

“Yes, it’s quite impressive. Oh, there it is.”

In the row of restaurants, there was one cafe that wasn’t open for business yet. It had a white facade and a fancy sign that said “la cafe kitayama” in lowercase letters. The large window gave a good view of the store interior.

“Wow... This looks like it’ll be popular,” I said.

I could see Ueda giving the staff instructions inside. His face was very stern. He looked like a different person from the Ueda that was all smiles at Kura.

“Ah, as expected, all of the staff he hired are good-looking.”

He was right—they were all beautiful young men. “You’re right. He did a good job recruiting.”

“Yes, Ueda is a man of his word. He has a lot of connections and a nose for a deal. He’s great at his job, but unfortunately, he has no eye for antiques.”

I giggled at how he ended the series of compliments.

We opened the door and said, “Hello, Ueda.”

“Oh, you’re here!” Ueda gave us his usual smile, which made me feel relieved. “Whaddya think of this place?” he asked proudly.

“It’s very nice,” we answered, nodding. The brightly lit cafe was furnished with wooden tables, stylish blackboards, decorative plants, and an open kitchen. It had a lovely, clean feeling.

“The location and atmosphere are both great,” Holmes said. “How about the food?”

“All right, I’ll give you a taste test,” Ueda said. He then shouted at the staff, “Make them a dessert platter for two!” and ushered us to a table.

We sat down. Holmes crossed his legs and said, “The chairs feel good to sit on.”

“Uh huh. It’s important to have enough space between the tables and chairs so you can comfortably cross your legs, right? The reason why I always end up going to Kura is ’cause of the coffee and the comfy seats. I’m trying to copy that here.”

“I see.”

As I was listening to their conversation, impressed, the dessert platter arrived. A variety of cakes, fruit, ice cream, and bite-sized sweets were neatly arranged on the plate. I wasn’t sure if I’d have the stomach for it since we’d eaten so many sweets at home before coming, but one bite told me I didn’t have to worry.

“I-It’s really good! I like how you can have a different flavor with every bite,” I said.

“The coffee is also quite good,” Holmes added.

“Yep,” Ueda said. “Including the drink, the set’s eight hundred yen. You get one coffee refill.”

“That’s all right, I suppose. It’s market price,” Holmes murmured, seeming unsatisfied.

“We’ve got a student discount, though—two hundred off. So, students can have this set for six hundred. Not bad, eh?”

Holmes nodded firmly. “That’s good. *DamJo* and the prefectural university are nearby, so you’ll be able to get repeat customers through word of mouth. An excellent plan.”

“All right, hearing the word ‘excellent’ from your mouth was all the assurance I needed!” Ueda clapped his hands, looking genuinely happy. The other staff

members tilted their heads, confused as to why their strict boss was so excited to hear such a young person's opinion.

"By the way, what does 'DamJo' mean?" I asked. *"Jo" means "woman," so...is there a place where women who like dams gather?*

Holmes and Ueda blinked before bursting out in laughter.

"Huh?" *Why are they laughing?*

"My apologies. I suppose there are still more terms you haven't encountered yet that only Kansai people understand," said Holmes.

"Hah, yeah. DamJo refers to Kyoto Notre Dame University," Ueda continued. It was a famous women's university.

"O-Oh."

"While we're at it, Doshisha Women's College is abbreviated to DoJo and Kyoto Women's University is abbreviated to KyoJo," Holmes explained.

"They're all popular schools with a good rep," Ueda added.

"I've heard of the schools, but not those abbreviations," I said. *Notre Dame has a great reputation, but calling it "DamJo" makes outsiders like me think of people who like dams.*

Then, the door opened quietly and a young woman came in. *This store isn't open yet, so maybe someone came in by mistake?*

"Oh hey, here's a former DamJo. Welcome, Izumi!" Ueda said, standing up.

Holmes and I turned around, surprised. Izumi was there, wearing a light pink coat and a knee-length skirt. She looked at us timidly. *Fair skin, a slim figure, wavy shoulder-length hair, large and bright eyes... She really is pretty.*

"K-Kiyotaka..." she said, fidgeting nervously.

Holmes said nothing and glanced at Ueda. I could tell that his eyes were asking, "What's the meaning of this?"

"I happened to run into her the other day in front of the shop," Ueda said nonchalantly. "She was crying, and when I heard what was wrong, I figured you were the only one who could solve it, Holmes."

Holmes sighed, exasperated. “Long time no see,” he said, appearing to have regained his composure. He faced her with a flawless smile.

Izumi sat across from him at Ueda’s behest, but she looked down, not making eye contact. “I-It really has been.”

“Did something happen?” Holmes asked gently. For some reason, I felt anxious.

“U-Um...my life depends on this...”

Holmes furrowed his brow. “Your life?”

“I was hoping you could expose something for me, Kiyotaka...”

“Expose? Expose what?”

Izumi fell silent for a moment before lifting her head and looking straight at Holmes. “An alibi...”

“What?” Holmes and I asked in unison.

“I want you to break an alibi for me,” she said with a determined look in her eyes.

Holmes and I inadvertently exchanged glances.

“An...alibi?” he asked, looking back at her with a blank stare. He must not have been expecting that. *Break an alibi? Really?*

“D-Did you get caught up in some kind of crime?” I asked without thinking.

Izumi hurriedly shook her head and said, “No, it’s not something so terrifying. I just want proof of my fiancé’s cheating.” She clenched her fists and bit her lower lip.

“You mean...*that* man, right?” Holmes asked.

Right—Holmes and Izumi used to be in a relationship, but when they started university, Izumi got “involved” with a man she met at a mixer, broke up with Holmes, and started going out with that man instead. They’re engaged now, but we know that she’s having second thoughts because of his unfaithfulness.

“To be honest, I ended up breaking off my engagement with him. I got in a fight with my parents, and my dad was really...upset. He was all, ‘You have no

eye for men. I'll find you a good partner so that you won't make any more mistakes,' and he went and found someone for me. It was basically a forced marriage meeting... I didn't want to, but I did feel bad for embarrassing my parents and making them worry, and despite my bluffs, I was exhausted from dealing with my ex. So I figured I didn't care what happened anymore and went to the meeting...and it turned out that he was a confident guy who manages a business, and he was tall, good-looking, and manly, so..." Izumi trailed off, blushing.

"It sounds like he was a charming man," Holmes continued for her.

Izumi nodded. "So I thought it wouldn't be so bad to accept..."

"Congratulations," Holmes said with a gentle smile.

"Th-Thanks."

I felt conflicted. *How does he feel hearing this from his ex who betrayed him? Can he look at this objectively since he's gotten over her? Ugh, Ueda's so insensitive.* I glanced at Ueda from the side. He was drinking his coffee and acting like this wasn't the least bit awkward.

Izumi continued her story, explaining that a couple of weeks ago, she had an engagement party at her family's house in Matsugasaki. Only relatives and close friends were invited—it wasn't a formal event, but rather, a party to introduce him to everyone. The party lasted from evening until late at night...

"That night, he stayed in our guest room," she said. We nodded.

The problem was what happened five days after the party. An unfamiliar woman visited Izumi at her workplace, a local office building where she worked as a receptionist.

"She said, 'I want to talk to you about him,' so I spoke with her during my break. She said that she'd been going out with him for a long time, but since he got engaged to me, he broke up with her," Izumi said, gritting her teeth.

Ueda crossed his arms and hummed. "Doesn't that mean he sorted things out? I know it ain't the greatest feeling, but that's fine, right?"

Izumi looked at Ueda and nodded. "Yes. Of course, as long as it's in the past,

it's not a problem. But then she said..." She took a deep breath and explained what happened. Apparently the woman had come to pick a fight, saying, "But he loves me more. The day of your engagement party happened to be my birthday, and when I said I really wanted to see him one last time, he came to me and held me passionately. It was at around nine o'clock? I'm glad I managed to finish things on a nice note. Good luck with your loveless marriage!"

Izumi said that her mind went blank and she couldn't say anything in response. Later, she questioned her fiancé, and he said, "I know her from work, that's all. She follows me around and it's annoying. It's scary that she came up with a delusion like that. Besides, I was with you all day during the party, right?"

We frowned silently at Izumi's fervent explanation.

"But something came to mind," she continued. "I'm positive that she was telling the truth." She clenched her fists. Apparently her fiancé had been drinking since the start of the party, and he told an attendant, "I have a slight headache. I'm going to lie down for a bit, so wake me up in an hour." He then went into the first-floor drawing room and locked the door.

"One hour later, he came back to the party area. I wasn't paying close attention to the time, but it does match up with what that woman said." In other words, he was gone at 9 p.m.

"Are you talking about that room that connects to the yard?" Holmes asked.

Izumi nodded wordlessly.

"Huh, so he sneaked out from there to meet with her and finished the deed in an hour. Now that's a hustler," Ueda said with a bitter smile.

"Indeed." Holmes nodded.

"But when I told him that, he laughed and said, 'I've accompanied her home for work-related reasons. She lives in Momoyama, you know? There's no way I could've gone there and back within an hour'..." Izumi cast her eyes down, looking pensive. Apparently she didn't believe him, so she did some research and found out that the woman really did live in Momoyama. "I still couldn't trust him, so I asked a friend to ask her coworkers, and someone testified that they really were dating. I only met with my dad's choice because I was sick of

cheating men in the first place... I don't want to marry a man who'd sneak out of his engagement party to have relations with someone else. There must be a way to go from Matsugasaki to Momoyama and back within an hour. Please, Kiyotaka, will you prove that and break his alibi for me?" Izumi leaned forward, teary-eyed and trembling.

"A round trip between Matsugasaki and Momoyama, after 9 p.m.?"

"I've got a map," Ueda said. He took a map out from behind the counter and spread it out on the table.

"I don't know if you still remember, but my house is here," Izumi said, pointing at a location slightly north of Kitayama Street.

"Of course I remember. Now, since he was drinking, he couldn't have driven there himself. Therefore, he either took a taxi or went by public transit. Your house isn't close to either Matsugasaki Station or Shugakuin Station," Holmes said to himself, checking the map.

"Taxi, then," Ueda said. "That road's chaos, so it'd be tough to get there and back in an hour. Plus, he'd only get one shot at it."

Izumi and I cringed at his vulgar implication.

"Regardless of what may or may not have happened, the trip would be difficult by car. No matter how empty the roads are, I'm not sure if he'd be able to get there and back in an hour. There's also the chance of traffic jams. So, as for public transit, if he went from Matsugasaki Station, it'd take about twenty minutes to get to Kyoto Station. From there, he'd go to Momoyama by train or taxi... One hour certainly does seem unlikely."

"Yeah." Ueda nodded.

Holmes put his finger down on the map. "Even if he took the Eizan Line from Shugakuin Station to Demachiyanagi and transferred to the Keihan Line from there, it'd still be hard."

As someone who wasn't familiar with the area, I couldn't really get it. "U-Um, what about by bike?" I asked hesitantly.

Holmes folded his arms. "Drunk cycling is also illegal, but I did consider that.

It's a little more than ten kilometers from Matsugasaki to Momoyama. I've heard that a professional cyclist can travel at an average speed of thirty kilometers per hour on a designated cycling path on a road bike. In that case, it would take twenty minutes. However, this is in the case of a professional, assuming no red lights and flat ground. Even if he's a good cyclist, when there are traffic lights and hills involved, I can't imagine it taking much less than forty minutes. It's not easy."

"What about a motorcycle then?" Ueda asked. "He could've ridden behind someone. Or what if he was only pretending to drink, and he was actually sober? He could've zoomed over on his own bike."

"Yes, a motorcycle would be the fastest way. However, I still think it'd take thirty minutes one way."

We all crossed our arms and contemplated.

"Umm, what if he went down the river?" I said, looking at Takano River on the map.

Ueda burst out laughing. "He'd stick out like a sore thumb. Can't have that happening when you're trying to be sneaky."

Izumi covered her mouth with her hand and giggled too.

I blushed. "Y-You're right. That was a silly idea."

"No, I think it's an interesting concept," Holmes said. "The elevation change might make it difficult, but he could've taken a small boat or canoe from the Takano River to the Kamo River. Then, he could go to Momoyama by bicycle or whatnot. Going there would be fast, but returning would be difficult. Plus, the birthday call was sudden, so I don't think he would've made those preparations in advance," Holmes explained calmly. I appreciated that he took my idea seriously.

"It really is impossible, then?" Izumi asked, slumping her shoulders. From her face, it looked like she was still unconvinced of her fiancé's innocence. She must've been absolutely sure the accusation was true, even if it didn't make logical sense.

"Yeah, the guy left his own engagement party for an hour, going from

Matsugasaki to Momoyama? Breaking that alibi's no easy task. Maybe he went by helicopter?" Ueda scratched his head and sighed. Then, he suddenly leaned forward, as if he'd just thought of something. "Hey, are you sure he went to her house? Couldn't they have met up at a hotel nearby?"

I frowned. "What good would it have done the woman to lie about that? It would've made more sense coming from him."

"I guess so, yeah." Ueda nodded.

Holmes looked at Izumi with a faint smile. "Besides, Izumi herself is confident that he went to her place. Did you see something that convinced you...?"

Izumi flinched. "What do you mean?"

"I suspect that you saw something she posted online."

Ueda and I nodded in understanding.

Izumi averted her eyes, a strained expression on her face. "You really are smart," she mumbled.

Holmes said nothing, patiently awaiting her next words.

"Like you said, after she told me all that, I found out her name from the business card she gave me and looked up her social media. Since he's an attractive man, I thought she might've just been jealous, so I wanted to make sure."

I was a bit impressed that she hadn't immediately lost her cool and blamed him.

"Then, I found this post..." She took out her smartphone, tapped a few buttons, and—albeit hesitantly—showed us a webpage.

We gulped and looked at the screen. At the top of the page was a selfie of a woman who was forcing a smile on her tear-streaked face. Also in the picture were a small couch with cushions and a small table. The table had a glass and two empty bottles of wine on it. It was clearly a single woman's cramped apartment.

The title said: "It's my 20th birthday. Today my love comes to an end."

The post continued:

He suddenly broke up with me last month. Apparently, he has to marry the daughter of someone his dad's indebted to. That woman looks nice, but she's a horrible person! She was engaged to someone else, but the moment she laid eyes on my boyfriend, she dumped her fiancé and asked her dad to do the marriage talks. But when my boyfriend heard about their family's circumstances, he couldn't turn her down.

I said I wanted to at least spend my birthday with him, but he said the engagement party was going to be that day. So, I sucked it up and drank at home instead, but I really couldn't take it anymore, and begged him to come see me while crying. Then, he actually left the engagement party and came! I was so happy. It means that I'M the love of his life.

Now he's going to be forced into a loveless marriage. It sucks, but I'm going to turn all of the memories he's given me into my precious treasures and move on. I'm writing this post right after he left, still crying.

So, I'm single now. Thanks for reading, everyone!

We were lost for words.

Izumi's hands trembled. "I-I can't forgive him. How could this be?!" Tears streamed down her face.

"But this doesn't match up with his story," Ueda said.

"That's the problem! I told him that if he really didn't want to marry me, I'd call it off. I said I didn't know how much money his parents owed my dad, but I'd ask him to reconsider! But he said, 'Don't be stupid. This person's just delusional. I love you regardless of the circumstances,' and, 'First of all, I've never been in her apartment.'"

"Um, are you sure this was posted on the same date as your engagement party?" I asked, looking at the post again.

Izumi nodded. The timestamp was 9:32 p.m. If it was posted after he left, then it would've been around that time.

Holmes silently tapped the image. All it said for the location was "Kyoto," so

we couldn't get anything more specific from that.

"I finally get it now," Ueda said, nodding and folding his arms. "So that's why you wanna break his alibi. You can't trust him at all now. That's gotta be rough."

Another tear ran down Izumi's face. Even though it was an arranged marriage, she was heartbroken from her ex, so she must've been attracted to this new man. She must've believed that he would be different. That's why it was even harder for her to accept his betrayal. She needed to know the truth.

"But why would this person write all of this in public?" I murmured. "Is this her way of harassing you?"

"No, this was written for her friends," Holmes quickly answered.

"Her friends?"

"She most likely bragged to her friends about her amazing boyfriend, so it'd be embarrassing to be dumped. Her excuse is that 'We love each other so much, but we were forced to break up.' She's trying to garner sympathy."

H-He's as sharp as ever.

"This post is biased in her favor, but I think he really may have visited her place on the night of the party," Holmes said, still looking at the screen.

"What, so we're back where we started? Guess it's the helicopter?" Ueda slumped his shoulders.

"No, he wouldn't have flown in a helicopter."

"I know, but then how?"

"I've come up with a theory." Holmes looked up.

"Huh?" We were all surprised.

"Izumi," he said.

"Y-Yes?"

"This is heading past the realm of 'suspicion.' Are you prepared to learn the truth? Sometimes it's necessary to turn a blind eye." A tense moment of silence passed.

“I came here because I *can’t* turn a blind eye anymore,” Izumi said with a determined look.

Holmes nodded, satisfied. “All right then. In that case, look into what I’m about to tell you. It’s going to be important evidence.”

“O-Okay.”

“Contact me when you’re done. I’ll explain the rest then.” He smiled.

“Okay.” Izumi nodded firmly, tears in her eyes.

After she left, Ueda heaved a deep sigh. “You’re a nice guy, Holmes. See, I happened to run into her right outside this shop the other day. I was like, ‘Hey there, Izumi, long time no see,’ and the moment she saw me, she started crying and went, ‘Please help me, Mister. I don’t have anyone I can turn to.’ She really looked like she was gonna die, so I said I’d ask you. I bet you didn’t wanna give your ex a hand, though.”

Holmes clasped his hands together. “It’s fine. It’s all in the past.”

“You say that, but you’re mad, right?”

“Well, it’s not so bad when I think of it as another debt you owe me.” He grinned.

“Ugh, that’s a scary thought.” Ueda slumped his shoulders.

Still, breaking her fiancé’s alibi... Even if the truth is revealed, it might leave a bad aftertaste. I sighed, feeling uneasy.

“Aoi, this isn’t something you have to worry about,” Holmes said quietly as he folded the map.

“Y-You’re right.” *My worrying isn’t going to help.*

5

Ten days later, it was Christmas Eve. The ancient city of Kyoto was no different from anywhere else with its flashy decorations. Department stores had Christmas displays and you could hear Christmas songs playing as you

walked down the streets.

While everyone else was making merry, it was winter break for me, and I didn't have anyone to hang out with. So, I was at Kura cleaning as usual. I looked out the window and sighed. *Is it because of my ailing heart that the couples passing by look more intimate than usual? There's nothing more depressing than a seventeen year old having no plans for Christmas Eve.* Just when I thought I'd hang out with Kaori, she said, "I'm going to Kyocera Dome to see a Christmas idol concert!" and left for Osaka.

I was originally scheduled to work at Kura this week anyway, and I figured I wouldn't be lonely because Holmes—who was also single—was bound to be here too. *If only it was that easy.* I was the only one in the store. Holmes went to help with the cafe in Kitayama starting on the twentieth, and today was his fourth and final day there. The manager was also busy with publisher meetings and interviews, so I was left to tend to the store by myself. With Holmes gone, most of the shifts went to me. I didn't know whether to be happy or sad about that. *That's also why I still haven't been able to go to the cafe to see Holmes working.*

But, just for today, the manager's working on his manuscript at the store counter, so I'm allowed to leave early. He's away at a meeting with his editor right now. When will he be back? I anxiously peeked outside the window.

At long last, the door chime rang, signaling the manager's entrance. "Sorry I took so long, Aoi," he apologized.

"It's okay." I shook my head. "I'm sorry I have to leave early."

"Don't be—we've been relying on you so much these days. I hope you have a wonderful Christmas Eve," he said, taking off his coat and hanging it up.

"Th-Thank you." *I don't have any plans for a wonderful Christmas Eve, but I can at least go to a fancy cafe in Kitayama, watch Holmes work, and eat delicious sweets...* I answered in my head.

I watched the manager sit down and decided to make coffee before leaving. As I went into the kitchenette, the manager took his manuscript out of his bag and picked up his pen. He had a calm, mature aura. He wasn't as eye-catching as Holmes, but he had an adult's subdued elegance. I thought it was very nice.

It's only natural for there to be women who admire this author, I thought as I placed the cup of coffee on the counter and said, "Here you go."

"Oh, you surprised me. I thought you were getting ready to leave. Thank you, Aoi. You're very thoughtful."

"N-No, not at all. Also, please accept this, if you'd like." I held out a wrapped bag.

"What's this?" The manager blinked and accepted the bag.

"They're cookies. Since it's Christmas, I baked them as thanks. Please eat them when you're taking a break from work."

"Why, thank you very much." His face wrinkled as he gave a big smile, making me feel happy too. "I'll work hard then, since you went to the trouble of making coffee and cookies for me. Take care, Aoi."

"You too. Have a nice day." I bowed and went to leave.

"Oh, Aoi!" he called out. I turned around. "Merry Christmas," he said, somewhat bashfully.

I smiled. "Thanks. Merry Christmas, Manager," I replied, feeling embarrassed too. I bowed again.

6

I got on my bicycle and sped off to Kitayama Street. The freezing winter wind stung my face, but since I was pedaling with all my might, I didn't actually feel cold. I reached Kitayama Street and spotted the "la cafe kitayama" sign. Despite the cold weather, there was a line of girls outside waiting to get in. A security guard—presumably a temporary hire—was shouting, "Don't crowd around! Please form a single file line."

W-Wow! It's this popular? I got off my bicycle and slowly walked it in front of the store. Through the glass window, I could see Holmes and the other attractive men wearing black vests and waist aprons. The cafe was completely packed.

The girls lined up outside were peeking inside and squealing:

“Ahh, they’re all so cool!”

“Today’s that guy’s last day, right? That sucks.”

“I’m gonna give him my number!”

The young women chattered happily, holding cute cards that I assumed had their contact info on them. The line was getting even longer. Behind the large window, many women were looking passionately at Holmes. As I expected, he was carrying trays of desserts with a gentle smile.

For some reason, I suddenly felt really sad. He looked like a different person from the Holmes at Kura.

...I should go home. I’ve already eaten the desserts here, and I got to see Holmes as a waiter, so that’s good enough. I tightened my grip on the handlebars and turned back the way I came. I walked slowly, putting the girls’ high-pitched squealing behind me. Suddenly, it felt like their voices became even louder.

“Aoi,” came Holmes’s voice from behind me. Surprised, I turned around. It was clearly him. I was so shocked that he came outside for me that I couldn’t form any words. The girls who were waiting outside stiffened up too, seemingly surprised.

“You came to visit, right?” he asked. “Are you leaving already?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s really busy, so...” I shrugged awkwardly.

“Yes, Ueda did a fine job.” He looked at the lineup and the packed interior and smiled softly.

Um, it’s because of you and the other hot employees, right? Although I guess that could be attributed to Ueda as well.

“I’m glad I noticed you,” he said. My heart skipped a beat. He was giving off a different sweet scent than usual, and it was making me dizzy. “I was actually just about to call you. Could you come back after closing? Sorry, I know it’s a bit late.” *The cafe closes at 8 p.m.*

“Huh? Why?”

Holmes bent down to whisper in my ear: “Izumi contacted me. She’s going to

come to this cafe with her fiancé after closing time. You're welcome to come too, since you already know everything."

It's finally going to be settled! I thought, when suddenly, the air was filled with high-pitched squeals that almost sounded like shrieks.

"Huh?" Holmes and I both looked up, surprised. Apparently everyone had assumed Holmes was whispering sweet nothings in my ear. Their stares were so passionate that I couldn't face them out of shame.

"O-Okay, I'll come back then!" I said. "Good luck with the rest of your work!" I waved and got on my bicycle, eager to get away. My heart pounded as I pedaled, but the sad feeling had been completely swept away.

7

I returned to the cafe in Kitayama at 8 p.m.

It's finally time. I sat at a window seat with my hands balled up in front of my chest. Holmes was sitting across from me. Ueda was sitting at the counter, resting his chin in his hands. It was already completely dark outside. Kitayama Street's brightly lit rows of stores and Christmas lights shone beautifully. In contrast to the dazzling scenery, my heart felt heavy. *What if it turns into a big fight?* I sighed.

Holmes put on a strained smile and looked apologetic. "I'm sorry for making you tag along for this."

"Don't be. I wanted to know the truth, and I'm glad I can be here. I'm just afraid that there'll be a fight..."

"It'll be fine." Holmes gave me a gentle look.

I immediately felt at ease. "Okay." It's strange, but whenever Holmes says it'll be fine, I can relax knowing that it *will* be fine. It's because despite everything that's happened, Holmes has always saved me.

At around 8:05 p.m., the cafe door opened quietly. "G-Good evening," said Izumi as she came in. "I'm sorry for all of the trouble I've put you through." She bowed.

We stood up and bowed back. It'd only been ten days since she came here, but she looked exhausted. The anxiety must've been killing her.

"It's fine. Where's your fiancé?" Holmes replied.

"I think he'll be here soon."

Her words made me nervous again.

"Shall we sit down and wait, then?" Holmes said.

Izumi suddenly became stiff and her eyes widened. Confused, I turned around and saw a man in a suit outside. He smiled when he saw Izumi. *This is her fiancé.* He was probably in his thirties. He wore glasses and had broad shoulders. At first glance, he had the air of an elite businessman. He certainly seemed like a great person, with his well-kempt good looks. *His aesthetic is similar to Holmes—maybe Izumi is into elegant guys.*

The man opened the door and said gently, "Izumi."

"T-Tachibana..." Izumi blushed slightly and looked down. *She's clearly a maiden in love.* Even though she wanted to break his alibi, it was clear that she was head over heels for him.

"Who's this?" Tachibana shifted his gaze to Holmes. They were about the same height, and Tachibana looked sharply at him.

"Hello, my name is Kiyotaka Yagashira." Holmes smiled gently in the face of Tachibana's blatant suspicion.

"I'm Aoi Mashiro." I bowed.

"He's, um, Seiji Yagashira's grandson..." Izumi said.

"Oh!" Tachibana exclaimed, probably recognizing the name. "I've heard about you. A smart guy called the 'Holmes of Kyoto,' right?" He smiled and offered a handshake.

"No, I'm only called 'Holmes' because of my surname. It's rather embarrassing." Holmes gave his usual response and shook Tachibana's hand.

Wow, Holmes's reputation is spreading.

"By the way, the person who's brazenly spreading these stories about me is

my grandfather,” Holmes said quietly, suddenly reading my mind. It seemed like he wanted to brush it off as the work of an over-affectionate grandfather, so I quickly shut my mouth.

“So, do you need something from me, Yagashira?” Tachibana asked calmly. There was a hint of pressure in his voice.

“Yes, Izumi asked me for some advice. I’ll explain everything in detail, so please take a seat.”

We sat down and Ueda brought us coffee.

“Is this about the engagement party?” Tachibana said in an amused tone. It was as if he was thinking, “This again?”

Izumi continued to look down, not saying anything.

“Izumi and I have already discussed it, and I believe she was satisfied with my explanation,” Tachibana continued, looking at Izumi beside him.

Izumi trembled and bit her lip with a pained expression.

“She asked me for help because she *wasn’t* satisfied,” Holmes said sternly.

“How do you two know each other?” Tachibana asked, glaring at him.

“Well...we went to the same high school.”

Obviously he can’t say he’s her ex-boyfriend. He didn’t lie though.

Tachibana seemed thrown off for a second before regaining his composure and raising the corners of his mouth in a smile. “I see. Of course you’d want to help such a beautiful former classmate.” He smiled wryly, his suspicions apparently growing.

It’s good that he cares about Izumi that much, but at this rate, they won’t be able to have a calm discussion.

Holmes seemed to be thinking the same thing, because he sighed and declared, “No, that’s not why I accepted her request.”

Tachibana frowned.

“I’m engaged too,” Holmes said, placing his arm around my shoulder and drawing me closer with a smile.

E-Engaged? I was taken aback, but I quickly realized that he was lying to make Tachibana lower his guard. I nodded stiffly.

“Oh, you two are engaged?” Tachibana murmured, seeming thrown off again.

Holmes nodded firmly. “Yes, so I couldn’t overlook Izumi’s concerns.”

I was too embarrassed to say anything—I could only blush furiously.

Tachibana finally seemed to let down his guard. A gentle smile rose to his face. “A rather early decision, considering your age.”

“I would prefer if you called it an *excellent* decision.”

“G-Geez, Holmes.” I tugged at his sleeve. Even if it was an act—no, *because* it was an act—it was too embarrassing for me to handle.

Tachibana laughed and said, “You make a great couple. I’m kind of jealous. I want to be like that with Izumi.”

Izumi’s cheeks flushed pink. I felt the tense atmosphere let up.

“Now then...” Holmes folded his hands on the table. “Could you tell me about the day of the engagement party again?”

“Sure. I visited her house in the evening, enjoyed the party until late at night, and slept there that night,” Tachibana answered smoothly.

“During the party, you felt unwell and left for an hour to rest in another room, right?”

“Yes. I was excited and drank too much. However, since the party was for us, I wanted to take a short nap and come back. I asked an attendant to wake me up in an hour.”

“It was the drawing room at the back of the first floor, right?”

“Yes. I slept on the big sofa there.”

“I heard that you locked the door.”

Tachibana’s eyebrows twitched. He smiled gently and said, “Yes. There were young children at the party, so I didn’t want them to come in and bother me.”

“And then after an hour, the attendant knocked on the door and you woke

up.”

“Yes.” He nodded as if the answer was obvious.

Holmes nodded too. “However, the problem came five days later. Someone claiming to be your ex-girlfriend visited Izumi and said that you slipped out of the engagement party, went to her house, and ‘held her tightly.’”

“Yes, I heard about that from Izumi. I’m so sorry that she had to go through that. That woman is someone I met through work. I knew she liked me, but I didn’t think she had delusions like that.” He had a grim look on his face.

“According to that woman, she knew that your engagement party was on that day. Did you tell her that?”

“No. I told my coworkers, but not her. She must’ve heard it from someone.” Tachibana shrugged.

“But it would appear that Izumi couldn’t shake her suspicions. She asked a friend to ask around at the woman’s company, and someone testified that you and she were dating.”

“I hate to say this, but that’s the result of her delusions.”

“What about the social media post she wrote under her real name?”

“I saw it, but she never said my name, right? It wasn’t about me. Even if she *was* talking about me, that would also be one of her crazy delusions.”

“You can’t use delusions as an excuse for everything. It could be that you led her to believe this. Are you sure you didn’t slip out of the drawing room to visit her during that hour when you were ‘resting’?” Holmes asked in a sharp tone.

Tachibana chuckled and shrugged. “Sure, I might’ve carelessly done things to make her misunderstand our relationship. But—and I told Izumi this too—she lives in Momoyama. How would I be able to get from Matsugasaki to Momoyama and back within an hour? That’s more proof that she’s deluded,” he declared with a smile.

Holmes looked him in the eye and said, “In that case, will you listen to my theory? Remember, this is only *my* ‘delusion.’ I’d appreciate it if you’d listen until the end without interrupting.”

Tachibana narrowed his eyes for a moment. Then he nodded firmly and said, “Go ahead.”

“Let’s say that you and that woman were indeed in a relationship,” Holmes began.

Tachibana looked like he wanted to object, but instead he silently crossed his arms. Next to him, Izumi was still looking down.

“However,” Holmes continued, “you did not consider her someone who could become your lifelong partner. At the very least, she was unimportant enough that you’d prioritize an arranged marriage from your parents. Perhaps you were already looking for the right time to break up with her. You surely would’ve phrased it in a tragic way like, ‘I can’t go against my parents’ will.’ You could’ve also hinted at a nonexistent debt. For a woman at the age where she’s seriously considering marriage, a man in debt is undesirable no matter how attractive he is. So, she would’ve backed down without a fuss.

“But then, she decided that she wanted one last memory with you. She asked you to spend her birthday with her, but by some strange coincidence, the engagement party was on that day—or perhaps it was you who selected that date in the first place. As a result, you wouldn’t be able to spend time with her on her birthday.”

It felt like Holmes was painting a scene with his words.

“On her birthday, she was drinking wine by herself in her room. She emptied at least two bottles, judging from the picture she took. Even though she’d accepted the breakup, the alcohol took its toll on her self-restraint, and she contacted you. I don’t know whether it was by phone or text message, but I think that whatever she said made you panic. It was likely along the lines of, ‘If you don’t come see me right now, I’m going to crash your engagement party.’ That’s what shook you up enough to rush to see her.”

We gulped.

“This raises one question: why did you give in to her threat so easily? Drunk as she may have been, would a grown adult living in Momoyama really look up Izumi’s address and come all the way to Matsugasaki to show up at her house? Even if she tried, she probably would’ve sobered up before she got there and

changed her mind. Were you afraid because *she was at a distance where she could easily show up if she wanted to?*

“In other words, we can assume that her house was nearby. Izumi’s house is a large mansion that everyone in the neighborhood knows. If that woman lived near Kitayama Street too, then she would’ve known that Izumi lived there. In that case, it really would be possible that she’d show up in a drunken stupor.”

I held my breath as I looked at Tachibana, who had an incredibly cold expression on his face.

“So, you sneaked out of the house. Since the drawing room connects to the yard, there would’ve been sandals there—or perhaps you secretly brought your shoes with you to begin with. Either way, you headed directly to her place.”

Oh, so he would’ve been able to go outside without passing by the front door.

“However, even if you went to see her, there was no guarantee that she wouldn’t cause trouble in the future again. She lived so close by, after all. Concerned, you stopped by a nearby convenience store first and withdrew money from the ATM. This was your ‘settlement money.’ You were going to have her move out of the neighborhood.”

Tachibana gritted his teeth.

“Then you went to her place. She must’ve been very happy that you showed up, right? She was moved to tears, and you hugged her tightly and apologized. You repeated that there was nothing you could do about the situation, handed her the settlement, and said, ‘Sorry, but I want you to use this to move somewhere else.’ Even if she was reluctant, she wasn’t about to turn down a large sum of money for something that was already over anyway. Since you’re so thorough, you might’ve also made her sign a pledge upon receiving the settlement.”

Tachibana glared at Holmes, keeping his mouth tightly shut.

“By the way, when the woman visited Izumi, she apparently said you ‘held her tightly,’ and I believe that’s really all it was—a tight hug. If you really went further and she wanted to provoke Izumi, I feel that she would’ve used more explicit language.”

Tachibana quickly looked down. Meanwhile, Izumi blushed, teary-eyed. She seemed relieved.

“Afterwards, the woman followed your instructions and moved to Momoyama. Since she lives by herself, moving wasn’t such a big deal. When she was done moving, she thought about the situation and decided to have one last word with the one who ruined your future...and that’s when she paid Izumi a visit.

“In conclusion, your alibi was entirely based on word manipulation. You convinced Izumi that meeting the woman would be impossible because she lived in Momoyama. However, you never had to go to Momoyama because at the time, she actually lived nearby. An hour would’ve been plenty of time. Well, that’s my theory.”

After Holmes finished his explanation, Tachibana stayed silent for a moment before uncrossing his arms and saying, “Ha! You have quite the imagination too, I see. I’m impressed.” His laughter sounded fake.

“It’s not my imagination. Izumi found proof that the woman recently moved—she used to live by herself in the Kitayama area. Didn’t you say that you’d accompanied her home to Momoyama before?” Holmes leaned forward a bit.

Tachibana smiled and nodded. “Yes, I did say that. She used to live in Kitayama until recently? I didn’t know that. When I accompanied her home, it was to her parents’ house in Momoyama,” he said, unperturbed.

Holmes chuckled. “I see—you’re thorough. Is that why you had her move to Momoyama?”

I could see the sparks flying between them as they smiled at each other. It felt like a battle between geniuses.

“So,” Holmes continued, “are you saying that you never once left Izumi’s house on the night of the engagement party?”

Tachibana slumped his shoulders. “To be honest, I really wanted to get some fresh air to sober up, so I slipped outside to go to the convenience store.”

“I see.” Holmes smiled, amused. He’d instructed Izumi to get testimony from the convenience store staff. Apparently one of the part-timers recalled a man in

a suit entering the empty convenience store at that time and spending a long time at the ATM. Tachibana must've realized that they'd discovered that and answered accordingly. *He's prepared to see this lie through to the end.*

"Well, what do you think, Izumi?" Holmes looked at her, exasperated.

Izumi was still looking down. "I-I..." She clenched her fists. Maybe she was attracted to her fiancé's stubborn side too. That's why she couldn't express a strong opinion—but she definitely couldn't accept his excuse either.

Tachibana looked up and said for good measure, "In the unlikely event that your theory was right, it's all over."

Right... It really might all be over. But...

"I-I can't let this slide!" I exclaimed without thinking. Everyone looked at me in surprise. "Y-You're not honest to Izumi or your ex-girlfriend at all! Even a complete stranger like me can tell that you're lying. Izumi knows you're lying too, which is why she's in such pain and uncertainty. Even if you love her, if you keep lying to her, she'll never be able to trust you. Everything you say will sound like a lie. She can't marry someone like that! Even if you did something bad, even if it's going to hurt her, she wants to know the truth. It doesn't matter how nice your words are if they're fake. If you really love Izumi, please tell her the truth!" Tears streamed down my face as I spoke. I knew how Izumi felt, and it pained me. She didn't want to continue being deceived like this. *No matter how much it hurts, they won't be able to move forward unless he tells the truth.*

I panted to catch my breath and realized what I'd just done. "S-Sorry, this is none of my business..." I hurriedly bowed.

Izumi shook her head lightly, crying. "A-Aoi, thank you for expressing my feelings in my stead. Tachibana, please call off the engagement," she declared.

Tachibana's eyes widened. He hadn't expected that.

"I felt mysteriously drawn to you from the moment we met," Izumi said. "I thought it was fate, embarrassingly enough. But if you still won't tell the truth, then it's over. As Aoi said, I can't spend my life with someone I can't trust. I'm sure I'll be disowned this time, but I don't want to be lied to." Tears ran down her face as she spoke.

“Izumi...” Tachibana was taken aback.

The cafe was shrouded in silence for some time.

“His theory...was mostly correct,” Tachibana finally mumbled. We looked at him without saying a word. “I was in a relationship with her, but I wasn’t considering marriage. When she kept hinting at it, I decided it was the right time. I was overjoyed when the marriage talks with you came up, Izumi.”

Izumi looked at him, confused. “Overjoyed?”

“Yes, overjoyed. I’m sure you never noticed that I’d always admired you whenever I saw you. I was shocked when I heard about your previous engagement. However, that engagement was called off and the reason was his cheating. I realized that despite your gracefulness, you also had a backbone.

“When the marriage was suggested, I accepted in a heartbeat. I felt like the luckiest man in the world... So I had to sort out my relationships. When I broke up with my girlfriend, she nearly went insane. Of course she would, since it came out of nowhere. She was sure that we were going to get married.” He heaved a sigh. “That’s why I lied and said that my parents owed yours a lot of money. I’d become the guarantor, and that’s where the marriage talks came from. Basically, if I declined, then I’d be in a lot of debt. That was my final bet. If she said, ‘I don’t care. Let’s pay back the money together,’ then I’d reconsider. I really had a feeling that she cared more about my salary and position than me, though... Marriage is a life-changing decision, so I was testing her. In the end, she immediately turned around and broke up with me.”

So that’s how it was.

“After that, it all went the way Yagashira said,” Tachibana said, sighing again. “Izumi called off her last engagement because of her ex’s cheating, so I thought she’d leave right away if the same thing came up with me. That’s why I tried so hard to lie... I didn’t want to let go of you. I’m truly sorry.” He bowed deeply at Izumi.

“Tachibana...” Izumi stared at him, wide-eyed and trembling. Her large eyes were wet with tears.

Holmes chuckled. “Aoi, let’s take our leave.” He stood up.

“Huh?” I was bewildered for a moment, but I quickly nodded and stood up as well. *The rest is for them to figure out.*

8

I checked the time right after we left the cafe. It was 9 p.m... An hour had passed. The intense conversation had made it feel like a lot longer.

Holmes and I walked casually down Kitayama Street. We passed by a chapel where hymns were being sung. The sign in front of the open doors said, “Everyone is welcome.” Attracted by the Christmas lights and the beautiful singing, we entered the church courtyard and sat down on an unoccupied bench.

“I’m sorry for what I said earlier, Aoi,” Holmes said.

“Huh?”

“I pretended that we were engaged.”

“Oh, it’s okay. Thanks to that, Tachibana’s suspicions were cleared and you were able to get to the main point.”

“Your eyes were terrifying when you looked at me. I thought I’d offended you.”

“Wh-What? I was just surprised.” *Were my eyes that scary?*

“That’s a relief then.” He smiled, making me blush.

We sat on the bench and looked at the Christmas lights in the courtyard. Families and couples passed by us, looking like they were having fun. The church’s cross shined vividly under the bright moon.

I watched my white breath melt into the air and murmured, “I wonder how it went between Izumi and Tachibana.”

“That’s a good question,” Holmes said. “In the end, he was sorting out his business before marriage, and they both love each other. After a storm comes a calm. I’m sure that having this major conflict before getting married will make their relationship stronger.”

“Oh, I see. It’s good that she was able to express her dislike of stubborn lies before they got married.” I nodded.

Holmes ran his hand through his hair as though he was troubled. “Sorry, Aoi. I lied about one thing.”

“Huh?”

“Or rather, there was a suspicion I had that I couldn’t be honest about.”

“What do you mean?”

“I said that when he snuck out of the party to go to her house, he only hugged her, right?”

“Oh, yeah.” *He said that if they went further, she would’ve used more explicit wording.*

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“Wh-What?” I squeaked.

“If he was going to play the role of an ex-lover who’d sneak out of his engagement party to meet her on her birthday and tearfully act like they had no choice but to break up, then she would’ve asked for ‘one last time.’ So long as he’s pretending he still loves her, he can’t outright refuse. He would’ve said ‘This is really the last time’ and did it.”

“B-But that’s just your assumption, right?” I didn’t want it to be true.

Holmes chuckled. “You’re a girl, so you don’t understand a man’s instinct.”

“Huh?”

“Why was Tachibana so desperate to cover up the truth? It’s because he did something wrong that night. Also, when I suggested that they didn’t go further, he looked down for a moment and clenched his fists as if he was relieved.”

“Wh-Why didn’t you say that?”

“As you said, when someone lies to cover up the truth, you can’t trust them anymore. But I don’t think it’s a good idea to tell the truth about everything. Besides, this is ultimately only my hypothesis—I have no proof. It’s possible that what I said was true. Perhaps they only hugged. I didn’t think it was necessary

to make them feel more uncomfortable if I wasn't completely sure."

"Y-You have a point."

"Most of all, I figured out how he felt..."

"You mean Tachibana?"

"Yes. Men are foolish beings. When they make a mistake and they're desperate not to lose the person they love, they try to cover it up with a lie. I could tell how afraid he was of losing Izumi, so I ended up giving him a way out," he said, looking up at the night sky.

"Didn't you feel conflicted, Holmes?" I asked, concerned.

He shook his head. "No, it really was over. If anything, I feel better now." There wasn't a hint of uncertainty in his smile.

"Thank goodness." I felt truly relieved.

"Thank you for your concern. Oh right, your speech was brilliant, Aoi. I realized again how sincere you are."

"I-I wouldn't call it a speech, and it wasn't brilliant. I just really empathized with Izumi, so I couldn't stay quiet..."

"I see. You really are sensitive."

"Sensitive?"

"Yes, I think you're very sensitive to people's feelings."

"A-Am I?" I tilted my head, feeling uncertain.

Holmes stared at the Christmas lights with a faraway look in his eyes. He seemed lonesome for some reason, and it made my chest feel tight.

"You said that men are foolish... Does that mean you are too?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm a fool...and a coward," he said calmly.

A coward? He doesn't seem that way to me. I stared at the side of his face.

Suddenly, he looked up and said, "Oh right."

"What?"

“Today’s Christmas Eve, right?”

“Yes.” I nodded.

Holmes put his hand in his coat pocket and took out something that looked like a card. “It’s not much, but this is a Christmas present for you.”

“W-Wow, thank you. What is it?” I excitedly opened it and found cards that said “Botanical Garden Annual Pass” and “Kyoto City Museum of Art Associate.”
Umm, what are these?

“An annual pass for the botanical garden we were talking about before, and an associate card for the Kyoto City Museum of Art.”

“What’s an associate card?”

“It’s a must-have for appreciators of the fine arts,” Holmes declared. He explained that it allowed you to see various exhibitions at the Kyoto City Museum of Art for free or at a discount. It also came with extra perks like being able to attend events for free. He said to go to their website for more details.

Seeing his eyes light up as he excitedly explained the card to me, I couldn’t help but smile, despite being a bit overwhelmed. *This present is so like him.* I giggled.

“Did I say something funny?”

“N-No, I just thought the present was so like you. Thank you very much. I’ll make good use of these.”

“Yes, please do. I should’ve gotten you something better, but I was afraid you’d be reluctant to accept.”

“O-Of course not.” *Then again, I’ve already received too much from him. It’s true that I might’ve felt bad if he gave me anything more expensive.* “Oh right, um, it’s not much, but I also have something...” I remembered that I’d brought cookies for him too, and hurriedly took the gift-wrapped bag out of my purse.

“Huh?” His eyes widened in surprise.

“I’m good at baking cookies, or, well, I like doing it. It’s not much of a Christmas present, but would you accept these?” I held out the bag.

Holmes stared at it for a while without saying anything.

I suddenly felt awkward. “Y-You’ve done so much for me. I guess homemade cookies aren’t much of a gift in comparison. Sorry.” Honestly, I’d wanted to give him something better too, but I didn’t know what to get him. In the end, I decided that making my best cookies would be better than giving him an unimaginative present.

“N-No, I’m glad. Thank you very much.” He gingerly accepted the bag of cookies and murmured to himself, “This is a lot to take in.”

“Huh?” What did he mean by that? Did he misunderstand because they’re homemade cookies? Maybe he thinks it’s something serious. I just wanted to thank him for helping me all the time... There’s no point if he’s troubled by them...

“I-I gave the manager the same cookies,” I said in a panic, wanting to make it clear that they were just a sign of thanks with no ulterior motive behind them. “He happily accepted them.”

Holmes froze. “Oh...” he murmured, sighing weakly.

Phew, looks like he’s not misunderstanding anymore.

My fingers had gotten cold, so I rubbed my hands together in front of my mouth. Suddenly, Holmes gently put his hands around mine. I looked up at him, surprised. He was gazing intensely at me.

“Your hands are bright red. You didn’t wear gloves?”

“I-I forgot, since I left home in a hurry.”

Holmes wasn’t wearing gloves either, but his hands were very warm.

“Poor thing. Your hands are as cold as ice.”

His large hands were wrapped gently around mine. I felt the blood in my cold fingertips circulating again. Actually, my entire body felt like it was heating up. My heart was beating a mile a minute.

“U-Um, Holmes...?”

“Aoi...”

“Y-Yes?” I was too scared to look him in the eye.

Just as he opened his mouth to speak, we heard someone call out: “Is that you, Kiyotaka and Aoi?”

Startled, we quickly let go of each other’s hands. I looked in the direction of the voice and saw Izumi and Tachibana. They were holding hands and smiling happily.

“Izumi and Tachibana!” I exclaimed, relieved to see them like that. I was conflicted about Tachibana’s actions, but now that their problem had been resolved, I really did want them to be happy together. “Isn’t this great, Holmes?” I turned around and saw Holmes looking down, his hand pressed to his forehead. “Wh-What’s wrong?” I asked.

“It’s nothing... Yes, it’s great that their adversity made them stronger.” He looked up and smiled.

Izumi and Tachibana cheerfully came up to us and bowed together.

“I’m so sorry for all the trouble I caused you two,” Izumi said. “Thank you so, so much.”

“Yes, thank you for...everything,” Tachibana said. “Aoi’s words struck home. My selfishness and insincerity hurt both Izumi and my ex-girlfriend. I’ll never forget this. I want to be sincere...and bring Izumi happiness.” He had a determined look in his eyes.

Holmes and I nodded and said earnestly, “We wish you happiness.”

The beautiful hymn coming from the chapel felt like it was forgiving all of the sins in the world. The smiles of the couples sharing their feelings under the mistletoe were dazzling in the soft glow of the Christmas lights... It was a happy Christmas Eve.

Chapter 3: The Bell that Rings in Gion

1

It's the end of December. The traditional Japanese name for December is *Shiwasu*, which means "priests running." It's thought to refer to how priests were busy with end-of-year services and New Year's preparations. Similarly, I was busy this month too.

"It's already the end of the year? Time flies," I murmured as I organized the shelves. I first came to this store in March. Spring, summer, and autumn passed. *A lot happened, but now it feels like the year went by in the blink of an eye. Spring will probably come just as quickly.*

Holmes was organizing the bookshelf. "Come to think of it," he said, turning around, "You have entrance exams next year, right? Which university do you want to go to?"

"Umm, I've been thinking about it, but I still haven't decided." *It felt like it was still a long way off, but now I realize that I'll have to start preparing in the spring. I have to decide soon.* Since I wasn't familiar with Kyoto's universities, nothing seemed to click. "Hmm..."

Holmes chuckled. "What about KyoJo or DamJo—the ones we talked about before?"

"They're both really popular women's schools, right? A lot of girls in my class want to go to one of those."

"What about Kaori?"

"Kaori seems to be aiming for KPU—the school you went to." Holmes had taken the route of getting into Kyoto Prefectural University and then switching into Kyoto University for grad school.

"KPU, huh? I can imagine that."

"Yep. I was thinking if I studied a bit harder, I might be able to go for it too."

“How about trying even harder than that and aiming for Kyoto University? Would you achieve my unsuccessful dream in my place?”

My eyes widened. “Th-That’s impossible.”

Holmes laughed. “There’s still time. You should think over it carefully. Kyoto has many good universities.”

“Okay.” I nodded firmly. *University, huh... I really do need to start thinking about it.*

Then the door chime rang and the owner burst in, shouting, “Hey, Kiyotaka!”

“Oh, welcome back.” Holmes gave a big smile and bowed. I’d heard that the owner had been in Tokyo for a long time because of work, so he must’ve just gotten back. Judging from Holmes’s smile, he must’ve done a good job there.

“Been a while since I had such a big job. I’m beat.” The owner heaved an exaggerated sigh and plopped himself down on the sofa. *I guess he did do a lot of work.*

“Get some rest. I’ll make coffee.” Holmes went into the back kitchenette.

I excitedly walked up to the owner and bowed. “Welcome back. Long time no see.”

“You look like you’re doing well, Aoi. Oh right, did you see that writing?” He pointed at the calligraphy on the wall with a gleam in his eyes. It was Taira no Kanemori’s poem, “*I hid my love, but not well enough, for others even asked, ‘Art thou pining for something?’*”—handwritten by the owner himself.

“Oh, yes. Your penmanship is very nice.”

“Thanks. Great poem, eh?”

“Yes. It’s about a sad, hidden love, right?”

“Uh huh. It’s real nice to watch young’uns hiding their feelings,” he said softly, glancing at me and smiling. His suggestive attitude made my heart beat frantically. *What did he mean by those words and that smile? D-Does he think I have a secret crush on Holmes? Is that why he said that? It’s true that I get captivated by Holmes even though I’ve set a boundary for my feelings, and sometimes he makes my heart skip a beat, but that’s because he’s an unfair*

Kyoto guy. There's nothing I can do about it. It's not my fault.

Our relationship is in a good place right now, but if other people start thinking I have a crush on him too, then I wouldn't be able to bear staying at Kura anymore. I really don't want that.

"I-I see. I've never hidden my feelings, so I wouldn't know," I said with a light chuckle, trying to dodge the topic. I couldn't tell if I did a good job of it, but fortunately Holmes was making coffee, so he couldn't hear our conversation.

"Oh well. In other news, Aoi, can you come over on New Year's Eve?"

"New Year's Eve?"

"Yeah, we're having a big party," he said smugly.

As Holmes brought the coffee over, he asked, "A big party? Who decided that, and when?" His mouth was smiling, but his eyes were clearly displeased. He exuded an overpowering, angry aura that sent chills down my spine.

"I-It was me, of course! Who else?!" the owner exclaimed, not making eye contact with Holmes. Maybe he was scared too.

"What a pain... Well, there's no need for such a complicated plan. Why don't we go to a hot spring like we usually do? It's a good way to relieve the fatigue that's built up over the year. I'll even make the reservation. How about a place with a view of Mount Fuji? Or do you want to see the sunrise from the top of a mountain?"

"Nope, we're having a party! This year made me so darn frustrated!"

"Frustrated?" Holmes and I asked in unison.

"Yeah. At my birthday party, I had the same art exhibition and buffet party as I always do, right?"

"Yes..." Holmes replied.

"But that old geezer had a fancy-schmancy 'authenticity game' at his! No matter where I went, everyone was talking about how fun it was!"

That "old geezer" was Yanagihara, another appraiser. In autumn, he held a birthday party at his house near Arashiyama and we played an "authenticity

game” that everyone enjoyed a lot. *Incidentally, it was Ensho who suggested the game to Yanagihara.*

“This is revenge! I’m gonna hold a New Year’s party and play a game!”

“An authenticity game...?”

“Heck no. I ain’t copying that old geezer.”

“So...you’re telling me to plan it?” Holmes looked even more displeased.

I unintentionally laughed. *It’s rare to see Holmes with that face. I think the only other person who gets to see it is Akihito.*

“Nah, I ain’t expecting anything from you. Your head’s full of old knowledge. You’re a clump of ancient wisdom, so even though you’re young, you act like an old man. I’m not gonna get anything new and exciting out of you.” The owner didn’t hold back either.

“Yes, I’m a Kyoto man—or rather, Kyoto guy, after all,” Holmes said smoothly as if unbothered.

“So I asked good ol’ Ueda instead and told him just how frustrated I was.” The owner clenched his fists.

“Ueda is busy with his own matters... You bothered him for something so unimportant?” Holmes looked utterly fed up.

The owner snorted. “What’s the big deal? He’s basically family. He seems like he goes to a lotta parties, so I asked what kind of stuff other people do. Our party game’s gonna be as flashy as it gets.” Still clenching his fists, he looked up at the ceiling with sparkling eyes.

“I’m envious of how you always have the eyes of a young boy,” Holmes said, squinting as if he was looking somewhere far away.

I couldn’t help but laugh again. “It sounds interesting though. What kind of game is it?”

“Not telling. Anyway, I just need it to be better than that old geezer’s party! Kiyotaka, I’ll tell you the details later, so take care of it for me.” The owner raised one hand and fled the store.

After a period of silence, I looked at Holmes and saw that he was face-down on the counter. “Um, are you okay?” I asked.

“With a grandfather like that, can you blame me for acting like an old man?” he murmured quietly.

“Not at all,” I said. “I’m looking forward to it though.”

“If that’s the case, then I guess I can put some effort into the preparations.” He slowly rose from the counter and sighed.

2

Before I knew it, it was December 31st—New Year’s Eve. Kura was open until 5 p.m. today. The plan was to go to the Yagashira estate after closing.

Today was special in that both Holmes and the manager were at the store. Holmes was cleaning the second floor, the manager was organizing the bookshelf by the counter, and I was taking items off the shelves to dust and wipe them. We were in that end-of-year cleaning mode.

The streets outside were busier than ever. Tons of people were walking by, but hardly any of them came inside our store. After cleaning for some time, I stopped for a breather. I heard Holmes’s footsteps coming down the stairs.

“I finished cleaning the second floor,” he said. “I think I should get going, Dad. Do you mind if I bring Aoi?”

“Sure. Thanks for the hard work you put in this year. I hope you can take it easy soon.” The manager smiled as he wiped down the counter.

“Um, where are we going?” I tilted my head, confused.

“I’m leaving first because I have to prepare for the party,” Holmes explained. “You’re free to come along. How about it?”

“O-Oh, okay.” I nodded firmly and hurried to take off my apron, even though I knew he wasn’t going to leave me behind. After changing clothes and gathering our belongings, we bowed to the manager and left the store. As expected, it was very crowded outside.

“This way,” Holmes said, walking south towards Shijo—where there were even more people.

“Um, where are we going?”

“Nishiki Market. But first, since we still have time, would you like to explore this neighborhood?”

“You mean the area around here?”

“Yes. Shinkyogoku Street has what’s called ‘The Eight Temples and Shrines of Shinkyogoku.’”

Shinkyogoku Street is the next street to the east of Teramachi Street. The Teramachi-Sanjo area is made up of several shopping streets intersecting and running parallel to each other. Despite being connected, each street has a unique atmosphere. *Also, I get the feeling that the area around Shinkyogoku has the most tourists of them all.*

I once said to Holmes without thinking, “The people in Shinkyogoku are young and stylish, right?”

His response was, “Shh, Aoi. You mustn’t say that.” Apparently it was taboo.

“Shinkyogoku Street has eight temples and shrines,” Holmes explained as we walked. There were seven temples—Seigan-ji, Seishin-in, Saiko-ji Tora-yakushi, Tako-yakushido Eifuku-ji, Anyo-ji Sakarengo, Zencho-ji, and Somedono-in—and one shrine, Nishiki Tenmangu. Many of them were entered through narrow paths that you’d normally walk past without noticing, but all of them had historical significance. There was a tradition that involved visiting all eight.

“Since we’re going all the way to Nishiki Market, I thought it’d be nice to visit them on the way, give thanks for the past year, and receive energy for the coming year.”

“Oh, that sounds great!”

“I’m glad to hear that. Let’s start from Seigan-ji Temple then, which is coming up in front of us. This temple is mainly known for its performing arts blessings.

Entertainers often come here.”

“Wow!” I happily headed towards the first temple with Holmes. After walking south a bit on Shinkyogoku Street, I saw the “Seigan-ji Temple” sign to our left. It was a very pretty temple that had a white gate accented with vivid red.

“Seigan-ji is also called the origin of rakugo,” Holmes said. Rakugo is a traditional form of comedic storytelling.

“It really is a temple for the performing arts, huh? Akihito should pray here.”

“Indeed.”

We chuckled and passed through the gate into the small temple grounds. We took off our shoes before entering the main building and stepping onto the tatami mats. There was a golden statue of the Amida Nyorai as well as golden lanterns and canopies hanging from the ceiling.

Someone was there. He clapped his hands and his voice echoed through the building as he prayed: “May my current momentum lead to greater fame.” He had brightly-colored hair and his figure looked rather stylish from behind. I recognized this figure.

Holmes and I reflexively froze and exchanged glances.

“Oh right, Aoi. Do you have a stamp book?” Holmes asked, ignoring the familiar figure and bringing up a different subject.

“No, I don’t.”

“You can have this one,” he said, offering me a brand-new notebook for collecting seal stamps. It was pink—one of the items sold at Kura.

“W-Wow, thank you!”

“Oh hey, it’s Holmes and Aoi!” The person who’d been praying—Akihito—turned around and looked at us starry-eyed.

Holmes hesitated before giving up and saying quietly, “Long time no see, Akihito. What a coincidence running into you here.”

“I was actually on my way to your shop when someone gave me a brochure about the eight temples and shrines of Shinkyogoku. Since there was one for

showbiz, I just had to come.” He enthusiastically put his arm around Holmes’s shoulder as usual.

“You don’t have to do that every time you see me. We’re going to pray now, so shoo.” Holmes brushed Akihito’s hand away as if it were a bit of dust and kneeled in front of the Buddha. I hurriedly knelt next to him and put my hands together. Since this place was mainly for performing arts blessings, it didn’t seem to have much to do with me. Instead, I prayed that I could develop some kind of special skill.

After praying, Holmes looked up and said, “All right, on to the next one.”

We left Seigan-ji Temple, but not without Akihito chasing after us. “Hey, wait for me, Holmes!”

“You’re going to Kura, right? That’s in the other direction.” Holmes pointed towards Teramachi-Sanjo.

“Yeah, but that was because I wanted to see you. I got invited to the Yagashira family’s New Year party.”

Holmes stopped in his tracks and turned around. “You were invited too?”

“Yeah, the owner called me the other day,” Akihito said with a proud look on his face.

“Aren’t you busy with work these days? Do you have time for this?”

“I was filming in Osaka yesterday and I’ve got a job in Kyoto right at the beginning of the new year, so it works out perfectly.”

“I see. Well, thank you for attending. The party is scheduled to begin at 5 p.m., so please go to the Yagashira residence around then. We’ll be awaiting your arrival.” Holmes bowed, then immediately turned on his heels and started walking.

“Hey, wait! Where’re you going?” Akihito grabbed Holmes’s arm.

“I’m buying things for the party and visiting the eight temples and shrines with Aoi while I’m at it.”

“I’ll come too!”

“You don’t have to come with us every time.”

“Hey now, you never know—I might be able to suggest this for my TV show.”

“Have you considered going by yourself?” Holmes spat out coldly.

“Wh-What...?” Akihito looked sad, like an abandoned puppy. I felt a bit bad for him.

“U-Um, Holmes, why don’t we all go together? The more the merrier, right?” I asked.

Akihito’s face lit up. “You’re a real angel, Aoi.”

Holmes sighed listlessly. “Yes, the more the merrier. All right.”

So, the three of us began our tour of the eight temples and shrines of Shinkyogoku. A little south of Seigan-ji Temple was another small entrance on the left side. This one led to Seishin-in Temple.

“This temple is significant because Shikibu Izumi was its first head priest,” Holmes explained as usual. Shikibu Izumi was considered the greatest female poet of the Heian period.

Akihito stopped in front of a wheel-shaped stone at the entrance with a sutra carved into it. *What’s that?* I wondered, craning my neck to see. I saw a sign that said “Suzunari Wheel—Please spin while praying.”

“This is called a prayer wheel,” Holmes explained. “The axle is Shikibu Izumi’s old lantern pole, and the pedestal was hers too. It’s said that if you rotate it once, you’ll gain the blessing of reading the sutra once.” Holmes placed his hand on the stone wheel and spun it. The sound of a chiming bell rang out.

“Ooh, lemme try.” Akihito pushed Holmes aside and stood in front of the wheel. He spun it with his left hand while holding up his right hand and chanting, “May I achieve success, may I achieve success, may I achieve success.”

“He’s serious about this, huh...?” I was kind of impressed.

“Yes, but if he’s so enthusiastic about his wish that he’d push other people out of the way, I think he’ll run into many difficulties in life,” Holmes said with a grin.

Akihito stiffened and his face went pale. I couldn't help but smile at how straightforward he was.

A wooden sign saying "Impart knowledge, impart love" hung by the gate.

"This temple is mainly for knowledge and love, huh?" I remarked. "Those seem like complete opposites though."

"Yes, Shikibu Izumi is known for her wisdom and her vast experience with love. She had relationships with over ten men, and that's only the ones we know of."

We entered the temple grounds. *Over ten men, back in those days...?* I was shocked.

"Is ten really that many?" Akihito tilted his head.

"Considering the era, yes."

"Oh. What's your count, Aoi?" Akihito peered at me with a grin.

"Huh?" I blushed.

Without missing a beat, Holmes grabbed Akihito by the chin and said, "Was it this mouth that said those disrespectful words?" Still smiling, he tightened his grip.

"Owww! I'm sorry!"

"Ugh, I can't believe you. Sorry about that, Aoi." Holmes let go and wiped his hand with his handkerchief.

"I-It's okay. I've gotten used to Akihito's sexual harassment."

"D-Don't call it that, Aoi!"

Holmes frowned. "I don't think you should get used to that."

I laughed and said, "You're right."

"Shall we move on to the next place?"

We continued on to Saiko-ji Tora-yakushi, Tako-yakushido, Anyo-ji, and Zencho-ji. Saiko-ji Tora-yakushi specialized in good fortune, warding off evil, and sound health. The tiger-themed charms and ornaments were adorable. Tako-

yakushido was for healing illnesses and eliminating misfortune. “Tako” means “octopus,” and true to its name, they had an octopus sculpture that you could pet to have your bad luck sucked away. Anyo-ji was for sound health, family prosperity, and the fulfillment of prayers. Zencho-ji was for sound health, long life, and apparently, clear skin.

We reached Nishiki Tenmangu where the god of academics, Tenjin—the deification of Sugawara no Michizane—was enshrined. As expected, it was even more crowded, especially because Nishiki Market was just to the right. Since I was going to be taking entrance exams next year, I prayed for higher grades.

Next, we headed to Somedono-in.

“This is the last one,” Holmes said. “It’s said to bestow the blessing of children.”

It seemed irrelevant since our group consisted of a high schooler and two single men, but we still stood in a row and prayed.

“Dang, these eight temples and shrines have it all, huh?” Akihito said as we left the temple. “Performing arts, love, good luck, prayers, warding off evil, clear skin, academics, and even children.”

“They do.” I nodded in agreement. *The eight temples and shrines of Shinkyogoku... Even though I’ve walked through this area countless times, I never even noticed that there were temples here.* I felt really fulfilled after visiting all of them. It felt like I’d done quite a lot of sightseeing today.

“Now for the battlefield,” Holmes declared.

“Huh?” Akihito and I looked at him.

“It’s Nishiki Market on New Year’s Eve, after all.”

I looked towards the market. He was right—it was packed full of people.

“The crowds here are not to be underestimated, Aoi. Please be careful not to get separated,” he said, placing his hands on my shoulders. He then looked to Akihito and said, “Akihito, if you lose sight of us, just leave. We’ll meet again in the evening anyway.” He waved.

“Hey, what’s with this difference in treatment?!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Also, you’re not *trying* to lose me, are you?”

“Your intuition is good, if nothing else.”

“Wait, you *are*?!”

“I’m kidding,” Holmes said nonchalantly. *I’m sure he was at least half serious...* “However, this really is a battlefield, so please be very careful. We can only walk single file, so make sure to stay right behind me, Aoi.” He entered the crowded, narrow path.

Enthusiastic shouts of “Come on in!” whizzed around us. Nishiki Market was made up of all sorts of stores, not just fishmongers. Shoes, pickled vegetables, liquor, meat, rice cakes, fruits and vegetables, sushi, dried foods, coin purses, flowers, pottery, patterned scarves, traditional thronged sandals—even stores specializing in sesame, dried sardines, or spice blends. *It’s really fun to see all of the different shops...but now’s not the time for that! It’s so crowded!* It felt like we were pushing through a jam-packed train.

“It’s me, Kiyotaka!” Holmes shouted in front of a shop specializing in rolled omelets, startling me in the process.

“Coming right up, dear!” responded the older woman working there. “Thanks for all your patronage. Say hi to Seiji for me, okay?” She handed him a plastic bag that seemed to have been prepared in advance. Holmes swiftly handed over exact change from his coin purse and continued onward.

“Hello, it’s Kiyotaka!” he shouted at the next stop. It was a tofu shop, and he was buying wheat gluten. Next came tofu fritters, light brown miso, round rice cakes, mackerel sushi, sliced dried herring wrapped in seaweed, red Kintoki carrots, Kujo leeks, duck meat...

Then he looked up and said, “This way, Aoi.” I thought he’d entered a pottery store, but he was actually climbing the stairs next to it.

“Hey, where’re you going?!” Akihito was struggling to make his way through the crowd to catch up with us.

There was a slightly old-fashioned cafe at the top of the stairs. There were

quite a few people inside, but it wasn't full.

"I didn't know there was a cafe above Nishiki Market," I said, surprised.

Holmes chuckled and sat down at a counter seat by the window. "You can look down on Nishiki Market from here."

I put my hands on the counter and looked out the window. "W-Wow!" A black wave of people was making its way through the cramped shopping street below.

"Dang, this is incredible," Akihito said excitedly.

"It feels strange that these seats are empty even though it's so crowded down there," I remarked.

"Most of the people coming to Nishiki on New Year's Eve are tourists, so they don't have time to look up," Holmes explained.

"Uh, I lived in Kyoto for a long time, and I still didn't know there was a cafe up here," Akihito responded.

The three of us sat in a row at the counter. As usual, Holmes and Akihito ordered coffee, and I asked for café au lait. Soon after, our drinks arrived—as well as two cakes.

I tilted my head. "Huh? Did we order cake?"

"Oh, I added those afterwards," Holmes said. "They're for you and Akihito." He smiled gently while holding his coffee cup.

"Wait, me too?" Akihito looked bewildered.

Holmes nodded. "You tend to be clingier around me when you're tired. Please eat something sweet to cure your fatigue."

"Holmes..." Akihito's eyes watered up as if he were moved.

But from another perspective, Holmes was saying, "Eat something sweet to cure your fatigue so that you won't bother me anymore."

Akihito happily ate his cake. "Despite everything you say, you really are a nice guy, Holmes."

Well, he might be right about that. Holmes is harsh on him, but I do think he's

nice despite what he says.

I took a bite of the cake and felt the tiredness from being tossed around in the crowds vanish into thin air. It really was tough being down there. *Holmes is amazing for being able to buy things so efficiently in that rush.*

Looking at Nishiki Market from above felt really fresh and somewhat mysterious. Holmes had taught me yet another of Kyoto's great locations.

Akihito scarfed down his cake, gulped down his coffee, and let out a deep breath. "The coffee was pretty good, but I still like yours more," he mumbled, staring at his cup.

"I'm honored to hear that," Holmes said, seeming pleased. "I'll make some for you later."

I looked down at my cup. *I always get café au lait. Holmes's café au lait is really good, but everyone always praises his coffee, so I want to be able to drink it black,* I thought to myself as I gazed down at the never-ending flood of people at Nishiki Market.

3

We somehow escaped from the jam-packed market and went to the underground parking garage in Oike where the company car was parked. We got in and headed to the Yagashira estate, which was close to the Philosopher's Walk. It'd been a while since I'd last been there. The Western-style stone manor never failed to impress.

Even though it was the middle of winter, the front doors were wide open. Many people were coming and going.

"Um, are the guests already here?" I asked, surprised.

Holmes shook his head. "No, those are my grandfather's hired hands. Yoshie is giving them instructions."

Upon closer inspection, all of the people were wearing aprons. They were probably cleaners and caterers.

"Come in," Holmes said.

We followed him inside and saw Yoshie directing the staff. “Right, put Mucha up in the main hall. Move that long table closer to the wall.”

The staff did as they were told. The walls were decorated with Mucha lithographs. There was a large wall clock next to the door—or so I thought, but it was actually a music box. By the bay window was an antique globe and tin model cars labeled “Porsche A.G.,” “Lamborghini,” “Volkswagen,” “Volvo 240,” and “Mini Cooper.” The hall felt more creative than it did last time.

“Thanks for your hard work, Yoshie,” Holmes said, walking up to her. “I’ll help you.”

“Oh!” Yoshie turned around. “You’re back already? Welcome, Aoi and Aki. Kiyotaka, I’m fine here, so please entertain Aoi and Aki. You should get some rest too, since you’re always so busy.” She patted Holmes on the back.

They really do look like parent and child, despite how young Yoshie looks.

Akihito smiled sweetly at her and said, “Heya, Yoshie. You’re looking as pretty as ever.”

“Thank you, Aki,” she said with a giggle. “I never miss your TV show. You’re working so hard!”

“Aww, that’s so nice of you.”

Suddenly, a worker shouted, “Excuse me! Where does this go?”

Yoshie turned around. “Put it in that corner.” She then said to us, “Can you three go to the second-floor living room? You’ll just get in the way here.” She shooed us away with her hands, smiling mischievously. *She really is a wonderful person.*

“Aoi, Akihito, this way.” Holmes led us to the end of the first floor. There was a staircase there with a shoe rack. We put on slippers and went up. *Come to think of it, this is my first time going into the living area of the Yagashira residence.*

The stairs led to an open space with a large TV, a European sofa and chest of drawers, and decorative plants. A chandelier hung from the ceiling. The walls were adorned with large paintings. There were also vases, jars, and water jugs

all over the place. This seemed to be the living room.

“Huh, it’s like a suite at a foreign hotel,” Akihito said.

We looked around curiously. I could tell that all of the art was highly valuable, so I was too scared to approach any of it. Trying to avoid the expensive things, I stood close to the wall and noticed that the bay window overlooked the Philosopher’s Walk.

“Wow, it’s the Philosopher’s Walk!” I exclaimed, pressing my hands against the glass.

Akihito quickly walked over to see and nodded. “This is amazing.”

“It really is.”

As we stared outside, impressed, the scent of coffee tickled my nose.

“Here you go,” Holmes said. He’d prepared coffee and a café au lait before I’d even realized he was gone. *Oh shoot. I was going to say, “From now on, I’ll drink coffee too.”* But as always, Holmes’s café au lait was the most delicious ever.

“Ahh, Holmes’s coffee is so damn good,” Akihito said as he drank.

I felt determined to ask for coffee next time as I drank my café au lait.

“The party will be starting in an hour, so feel free to watch TV until then. We have recordings of Akihito’s shows too. Shall I play them?” He picked up the remote and grinned.

“Um, I want to see your room,” I said, leaning forward a bit.

Holmes’s eyebrows twitched. “My...room?” He seemed reluctant.

“What’s the problem here? Is it full of porn mags?” Akihito’s eyes lit up in amusement.

“No, there’s nothing like that. It’s just that I didn’t expect to have guests in my room, so I haven’t cleaned it.” Holmes smiled awkwardly.

It’s true that I didn’t go to Holmes’s room the last time I was here. Actually, I didn’t even enter the living area, so I assumed it’d be the same this time. We wouldn’t have come this far if it weren’t for Yoshie. *But considering it’s Holmes, his room must be sparkling clean. There must be another reason why he doesn’t*

want to let us in.

“Umm, we can save it for next time then. Let’s watch Akihito’s show.” I nodded and picked up the remote.

“No, it’s fine. I just feel bad because it’s messy.” Holmes stood up and started walking. Akihito and I followed him into the hallway. The air felt chilly, perhaps because of the stone walls.

“You really don’t have any porn mags?” Akihito asked eagerly.

“I don’t.”

“For real?”

“Yes. I don’t buy those things in print form. It’s all digital,” Holmes said smoothly. Akihito and I were taken aback.

“Oh, so it’s all on your tablet,” said Akihito, dumbfounded.

“Yes. It’s password-protected, so it’s quite safe, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah. You can carry around a lot of data with you, huh? I’d expect no less.”

“I’d rather you didn’t expect this.”

My face stiffened at their sudden guy talk. “Umm...”

“Sorry,” Holmes said. “This is just between us.” He held his index finger in front of his mouth, and I couldn’t help but blush. It was kind of frustrating how he made my heart skip a beat after a conversation like *that*. “It’s all your fault, Akihito. How could you make me say that in front of a lady?”

“Wait, that was *my* fault?”

Holmes’s room was at the end of the hallway. It had an old-fashioned dark brown wooden door with a brass doorknob, fitting for a Western-style mansion. *I’m sure it’s going to be clean and gorgeous.* I nervously watched the door open with a *click*, and I gaped when I saw what was inside. Holmes was right... It really *was* messy. Well, to be precise, it was mountains of books. There were piles of papers on the desk. Thick books that seemed like art magazines and textbooks were stacked high on the floor and nightstand. Everything might’ve been clean, but with all of these books strewn around, the room seemed

incredibly disorganized.

“Holy crap, it really is messy.”

“I told you it wasn’t ready for visitors.” Holmes was unashamed.

“B-But why is everything scattered around like this? The store and the living room are so clean!” I asked, genuinely confused.

“The store is for business, and the living room and kitchen are shared spaces. This room is a place where I won’t inconvenience anyone. The books pile up because there are a lot of materials I want to read. I study them at my desk, then move to the bed and fall asleep while reading. When I wake up, the books I want to read are within arm’s reach. It makes logical sense, right? My special skill is looking at stacks of books and quickly locating the one I want.” Holmes swiftly picked a book out of the mountain and said, “See?” He looked at us confidently.

Um, Holmes...

“It’s messy, but nothing is dusty,” he continued. “My room at the other place is much cleaner. Since this house has a lot of resources, I end up getting absorbed in reading everything. I clean up in advance if I’m going to have guests over.”

Um, Holmes...

“Oh, have you finally become disillusioned?” Holmes peered at my face, seeming concerned about my lack of response.

I couldn’t help but laugh at that. “No, it’s fun how you’re always surprising me. And I’m kind of relieved that you have this side of you, considering that you always seem perfect.” *The sparkling clean store, the neatly organized shelves... He always seems tidy, but that’s all on the outside. His own room is a mess and it doesn’t bother him.* It was unexpected and yet still very much like him.

“Do you want me to help you clean up?” I asked.

“No, it’s fine. This way is more convenient for me,” he answered immediately. I laughed again.

“Man, what’re you reading so much of? Are they all books about art?” Akihito

looked around the room and sighed.

“Yes, art and history. Lately I’ve been enjoying reading sales catalogs from the Taisho period.”

“Sales catalogues?” Akihito and I stared at him blankly.

Holmes nodded, put on his white gloves, and took an old booklet from a shelf.

“That one was in an actual bookshelf, huh? You even put on gloves,” Akihito commented.

“Yes, because this book is very valuable.”

“What kind of book is it?” I peered at the booklet but couldn’t read the brush writing.

“The first bubble economy of the Taisho period created a lot of new wealth. The people who came into money were so prosperous that there’s a story about how they would light one-yen bills—the equivalent of ten thousand yen today—on fire to light up dark restaurant entrances.”

“Whoa, they set money on fire?!”

“I don’t know how much of that is true, but it’s an example of how thriving the era was. During that time, all of the upstarts collected antique art. However, frequent scares made the bubble burst, and they created sales lists for selling their antique collections. These are the catalogues I’m talking about. They’re great references, and the books themselves have quite a lot of value as antiques. Reading them is so fun that I lose track of time.” He smiled, gently closed the book, and put it back on the shelf.

Akihito and I couldn’t understand the feeling, so we looked at each other with strained faces.

“By the way, my grandfather has sales catalogues from the Tokugawa family and other feudal lords. Those are a worthwhile read too.”

“The Tokugawa family? That’s impressive,” I said.

“Yes. Ever since the Meiji period, feudal lords would sell their antiques. Also, there was a period when valuable works of art circulating in the city would make it all the way to the West. At that time, Takashi Masuda—said to be the

foster parent of Mitsui and Company—played a central role in buying them back and preventing further outflow. It was truly amazing,” Holmes explained passionately.

“T-Takashi Masuda, the foster parent of Mitsui and Company, huh...” I didn’t know that.

“Merchants are incredible. It was merchants who supported the country throughout the long Edo period. They say that the wealthy ones like the Mitsui family and the Ito family loaned the equivalent of almost twenty billion yen today to the shogunate. The shogunate ruled by means of the merchants’ power, meaning that this country was originally based on them. Would you like to look at some materials from that time? I have them right here.” Holmes took a book out of the pile.

“Wait, stop!” Akihito interrupted. “It’s almost five, so we need to go downstairs!”

“You’re right,” Holmes said, looking at the clock. “Let’s go then.” He put the book back on top of the stack.

We left the room, and I stared absentmindedly at Holmes’s back as I walked behind him. Akihito was next to me. He glanced at me and whispered in my ear, “Man, wouldn’t it be tough to have a weirdo like him for a boyfriend?”

My cheeks felt hot. “I-I wouldn’t know.”

“What do you think about it, Aoi?”

“Wh-What?” I looked down so that he wouldn’t notice my blushing. “I-I think he’s amazing, but...no matter how I feel, someone with such a high sense of beauty isn’t going to choose me, so it’s like I’ve drawn a line that I’m not going to cross...” I mumbled.

Akihito’s eyes snapped open. “Uh, I was asking what you thought about his weirdness...”

“Wh-What?” *That’s what he was asking about? This is too embarrassing!*

“Well, I get what you’re saying. At first I thought Holmes might see you in a special way, but it seems like he actually sees you as someone who experienced

the same heartbreak as him. Besides, he's nice to everyone."

"I knew it."

"So like, what do you think about his weirdness?" he asked again.

I smiled wryly. *Holmes is definitely eccentric, but I like listening to his stories. It's kind of like...* "I've gotten used to it already."

"Huh. Come to think of it, so have I."

We both laughed.

4

We returned to the first floor hall. It looked like the party preparations were complete. Japanese, Chinese, and Western dishes were laid out on long tables covered with white tablecloths. Waiters in white clothes were overseeing them. It was a hotel-style buffet again this time.

The owner was wearing a kimono as usual, while Yoshie wore a simple dress. Familiar faces like Ueda and Mieko were chatting happily. I didn't see the manager yet. He was probably coming after the store closed.

The owner blatantly frowned when he saw Holmes. "What's with that getup, Kiyotaka? Can you put on a tux or something?"

Holmes was wearing a simple shirt and jeans. "It's fine," he said nonchalantly. "It's just a New Year's house party."

"That's a cute two-piece dress, Aoi," said Yoshie. "I forgot to mention it earlier. It looks really good on you."

"Thank you," I said, feeling embarrassed. I'd worn it today with the party in mind, so I was glad to be complimented by someone with good fashion taste.

"It ain't fine," the owner said to Holmes. "Your job is to bring the guests champagne, so at least wear something more professional! Heck, go put on what you wore at Ueda's cafe."

"Fine, fine." Holmes shrugged. He turned to us and said, "Sorry, I'll be right back. Please make yourselves at home."

“Oh, okay.”

He left the party hall to go back to his room. Akihito and I looked around.

“That’s Mucha, right?” Akihito asked, pointing to the lithographs on the wall. I followed his eyes and saw four long vertical panels.

“Right.” I nodded. “They’re lovely.” I walked up to them. The four paintings were probably of the same female model, but each showed different expressions.

“I heard that Yoshie has the same ones in her house,” came a voice from behind me. I turned around in surprise and saw Yoneyama smiling weakly. He was a lanky, androgynous man with his long hair tied back in a ponytail. He used to be a counterfeiter, but he washed his hands of the business after the owner exposed him, and now he works at an art gallery while creating his own paintings.

“Long time no see, Yoneyama.”

“Sup, Yoneyama!”

“Long time no see, Aoi and Aki. We last met at Yanagihara’s party, right?” Apparently Yoneyama and Akihito had grown quite close, to be speaking so casually to each other.

“Yoshie has the same ones?” Akihito asked. “Which one’s the fake, then? Wait no, these are prints, right?”

Yoneyama nodded. “Yes, they’re lithographs. These depict the four times of day—dawn, daytime, evening, and night,” he said, looking at the panels.

I see. The first one had a soft frame decorated with flowers and seemed to represent getting up in the morning. The daytime one had a bright, energetic facial expression. In the evening, the woman was resting her chin in her hand, immersed in thought while gazing at the sunset. And then at night, she went to sleep. All of the paintings had a soft, delicate beauty. They were wonderful.

“Oh hey, the titles are written underneath.”

The four times of day: *Morning Awakening*, *Brightness of Day*, *Evening Reverie*, and *Night’s Rest*.

“Yoshie loves Mucha,” Yoneyama said earnestly. “Mr. Yagashira gave these lithographs to her as a way of saying, ‘I’m thinking of you at all times.’ Then Yoshie gave him the same ones and said, ‘Always think of me.’”

So that’s why Yoshie has the same ones. They gave each other the same heartfelt lithographs... That’s so romantic. I stared absentmindedly at the panels.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” came Holmes’s voice from behind me. I turned around and saw that he’d changed into a white shirt, a black vest, and black pants, just as the owner had requested. The style he wore at the cafe really looked good on him.

5

Later, the manager arrived. Several of the owner’s friends, including Yanagihara the appraiser and Hanamura the flower arrangement teacher, came as well. There were also people from the art industry. All of them radiated influence. *They must be amazing people.* It felt like a party hosted by a politician. Holmes and I might’ve been the only ones who were younger than Akihito, who was twenty-five.

“Thanks for inviting us!”

I looked in the direction of the familiar voice and blinked. “What?! Kisuke Ichikata and Rei Asamiya?!” It was the kabuki actor and the famous actress that Holmes befriended during the Kaomise incident. *I didn’t expect them to come to the Yagashira family’s party, though!*

It wasn’t just me who was surprised by these high-class guests—everyone in the hall started murmuring.

Akihito’s jaw dropped too. “Why’s Kisuke here?”

“My grandfather told me to ‘invite some flashy guests,’ so I figured it wouldn’t hurt to try. They both readily accepted the invitation.” Holmes walked up to them and said, “Welcome. Thank you very much for coming today.” He bowed deeply.

Kisuke shook his head, smiled, and said, “I was happy you invited me. Thank

you.” He was wearing a black suit that really fit him. At a glance, his injured leg seemed to have healed.

“I’m happy to be here too, Holmes.” Rei was wearing a simple black dress. She had a bright smile on her face, and as always, she was stunningly beautiful.

“Now that our special guests are here, it’s time for another toast,” the owner said. “Thanks for this year, and cheers to the next!” He raised his glass and everyone shouted, “Cheers!”

“Phew, I’m glad his speech was short this time.” Akihito easily said what everyone was thinking but didn’t say out loud, startling us.

“Yes, I mentioned to him beforehand that Yanagihara’s short speech was well received,” Holmes added smoothly, making me laugh.

The guests picked up their plates and began piling them with food. Tender Wagyu beef and chicken of the finest quality, terrine, fresh shrimp and salad, crab gratin, a wide assortment of sashimi, roast beef, and pork—everything looked delicious. The beverages offered were beer, wine, champagne, Japanese rice wine—and several types of non-alcoholic drinks, which I appreciated.

After everyone had their fill and the festivities calmed down, the owner went to the middle of the hall and cleared his throat. “Now that your stomachs have settled down, I think it’s time to play a little game.”

“Oh!” Everyone looked at him.

“It’s game time! I’ve been waiting for this!” Akihito shouted, clenching his fists.

“Oh? What kind of game?” Yanagihara rubbed his hands together in a “show me what you’ve got” way.

The owner immediately beckoned at Holmes. “Kiyotaka, explain it to them.” Apparently he didn’t want to deal with explaining the details himself.

Holmes seemed unimpressed as he walked over to the owner and stood next to him. “Well then, allow me to explain. The game Seiji Yagashira will be hosting is a treasure-hunting game.”

“Treasure hunting!” Everyone’s eyes lit up.

“We’re going to hand out a riddle that I created. Your task is to solve the riddle and find the hidden key to the treasure. Whoever wins will receive that pure gold key and a present from my grandfather.”

“Oooh!” everyone exclaimed.

“It’s a treasure hunt!”

“A pure gold key *and* a gift from the owner?!”

“Now this is worth trying for.”

The hall quickly filled with chatter. Holmes took a brown envelope out of a drawer. Presumably the riddle was in there.

I walked up to him and asked quietly, “Holmes, is this the game that Ueda suggested?”

Holmes smiled wryly and nodded. “Yes. Despite everything my grandfather said, it ended up being a simple, straightforward game.”

I giggled. Holmes took a bundle of papers out of the envelope and handed one to everyone. The paper was faded as if it were an old treasure map. The riddle was composed of five lines written in ink. I anxiously read them:

In Munch’s sight

The maiden’s time of embrace

The small country’s people whisper that I spin around

The key you search for does not travel

It merely waits for you there

Um, what? I thought.

“By the way, I had to make Kiyotaka rewrite this a bunch of times,” the owner said. “The stuff he comes up with is too hard, so it took a while to get it to a solvable level.” He laughed heartily.

Holmes tilted his head. “Isn’t this a bit too easy?”

N-No way! This text says where the treasure is, right? I can’t make heads or tails out of it. I looked at the riddle again.

The manager chuckled. "Everyone looks confused, Kiyotaka."

Right, it wasn't just me. Everyone was standing stock still, looking at the riddle.

"H-Hey, Holmes, I don't get it!" Akihito shouted without looking up from his paper. Kisuke and Rei nodded in agreement.

"Let's see... The treasure is hidden somewhere on the first floor. There are also hints scattered around this floor that will help you solve the riddle. Please look for them. You can also team up with others. We may provide extra hints depending on how people are progressing." Holmes smiled.

The guests exchanged glances with each other.

"Kisuke, let's work together," Rei said, placing her hand on his shoulder.

"This makes no sense to me, Ueda. Let's team up. I don't want to lose," Mieko insisted.

Ueda laughed and replied, "You're really motivated, huh?"

Other people were walking around and talking to each other too.

Akihito came up to us and said, "Aoi, Yoneyama, let's team up!"

Yoneyama shook his head apologetically. "Sorry, I'm on the organizing side. Kiyotaka asked me to be a monitor, so I already know the answer."

"Oh, I see."

"I don't think the riddle is too hard to be solved. Do your best, guys."

We stared at him in surprise. "It's not too hard?"

"Umm, instead of reading the whole thing and being overwhelmed, I think you should try solving it one line at a time."

Akihito and I looked at the riddle again. The first line was "In Munch's sight."

"Munch means *that* Munch, right?" Akihito opened his mouth wide and put both hands on his cheeks, mimicking Munch's *The Scream*.

"I-I think so," I said. "You didn't have to imitate it..."

"Who cares? This is basically a challenge from the Holmes of Teramachi-

Sanjo! I, Akihito Kajiwarara—also known as the Shunsaku Kudo of Shijo-Karasuma—will solve this mystery!” He pointed his finger at Holmes.

“Shunsaku Kudo?” I tilted my head.

“It’s the name of the detective in an old TV series called *Tantei Monogatari*,” Holmes answered cheerfully. “He was played by Yusaku Matsuda.”

“Can you at least *try* to play along?!” Akihito exclaimed. We all burst out laughing, but a moment later, the other participants were back to discussing the riddle in their groups.

“This way, Aoi!” Akihito shouted, running out of the hall.

“H-Huh?” I chased after him, confused. *Since Holmes said there were hints scattered around this floor, maybe Akihito noticed something conspicuous. Despite how careless he seems, he might actually be good at rising to the occasion.* I was impressed by how he didn’t hesitate to go for it, but for some reason, he ran all the way to the end of the floor, took off his shoes, and continued upstairs.

Startled, I followed him. “Wait, are you going upstairs, Akihito?” I called. “He said that the hints and the treasure were all on the first floor.”

“You didn’t notice it, Aoi?”

“Huh?”

“When we went into Holmes’s room earlier, he hid something behind his back that was on the chest of drawers. He did it in a really natural way that ordinary people wouldn’t notice.”

“I-I didn’t realize.” *But if it was in a way that ordinary people wouldn’t notice...* “I’m impressed that you saw it then, Akihito.”

Akihito stopped in his tracks. “I’ve been on a lot of variety shows lately with famous magicians like Masamune, so I’ve had a lot of opportunities to observe their special techniques. The way Holmes moved earlier was really similar to how magicians move, which caught my interest.”

“I see.” *So the way Holmes moved to hide that thing was the same as a magician.*

“I thought for sure he was hiding a picture of his ex or something, so I didn’t say anything, but...”

I frowned, unable to believe what he was saying.

“...when I thought about it, I realized that he’s not the kind of guy who’d put up a picture of his ex. I think he probably left the answer sheet to the riddle there. That’s what he was hiding!”

“I-I see...”

“If we can find that, the riddle’s as good as solved! The treasure’s ours!” He pumped his fist.

The Shunsaku Kudo of Shijo-Karasuma uses cheap tactics...

“C’mon, Aoi!” He ran towards Holmes’s room.

If it really is a rough draft of the riddle that gives away the answer, I don’t think I’d like to win that way. But I don’t think Holmes would make something like that. I get the feeling that he was hiding something else. What was it, then? Something in his defenseless room that he didn’t think anyone else would enter... I’m curious, but I couldn’t possibly peek.

Not caring that I’d stopped following him, Akihito opened the door to Holmes’s room. The unlocked room was pitch black inside. Turning on the light revealed the mess that we saw before. Akihito went inside, careful not to step on the piles of books and documents. He looked on top of the chest and said quietly, “I think it was somewhere around here.” He put his hand on a light blue booklet.

My heart beat faster and faster until I couldn’t take it anymore, and I burst into the room to grab his arm. “I-I don’t think we should look at what he was hiding!” The force resulted in the booklet falling onto the ground, together with the thing that was hidden underneath it. “Oh no!”

“Crap!” Akihito quickly stooped over to pick up the booklet, revealing what Holmes had been hiding. Our eyes widened the moment we saw it.

It was a folding fan painted with autumn leaves. The words “I win” were written on it. I recalled what Holmes had said before: *“This fan was originally*

mine. He wrote 'I win' all over it."

"H-Hey, is this...?" Akihito looked at me in shock.

I nodded. *Yes...this is Ensho's fan.* Holmes's second encounter with Ensho was at Genko-an Temple. There, Ensho had thrust a folding fan at him, and he caught it and snapped it into two. The broken fan had been fully repaired. *I didn't notice the autumn leaves design back then...*

Holmes wouldn't have put this folding fan on display for the sake of reminding him of his determination to not lose to Ensho. If that were the case, he wouldn't have hidden it from us.

Holmes couldn't throw it away. He must've tried to many times, but he still couldn't do it. I'm sure it was because he sensed artistic value in the letters and autumn leaves that Ensho painted. He sensed value in the work of the person he least wanted to acknowledge.

Ensho's folding fan had been displayed on top of the chest of drawers. When I thought about how Holmes must've felt when he hid it from us, and his inner conflict of not being able to throw it away, my chest hurt.

Akihito and I silently put the fan and booklet back where they were and let out a deep breath. Then we heard quiet footsteps and Holmes appeared at the door. Startled, we whirled around.

"What do you think you're doing, going into someone's room without permission?"

"S-Sorry!" I hurriedly bowed.

Holmes shook his head. "I don't mind if it's you, Aoi. Akihito must've dragged you here, right? So, what were you doing here, Akihito?"

"Oh, sorry. I thought there might be a rough draft of the riddle or something," Akihito answered shamelessly. Since it was the truth, it sounded very authentic.

"Why am I not surprised? However, there is no such thing here. I know that Detective Shunsaku Kudo will use any means at his disposal, but I *did* say that all of the hints were on the first floor." Holmes sighed, exasperated.

"S-Sorry." Akihito slumped his shoulders.

“Let’s return now.” Holmes swung the door open.

We nodded and left the room.

Back on the first floor, people were walking around mumbling to themselves and opening the art books that were neatly laid out on the table.

“Let’s follow Yoneyama’s advice and solve it one line at a time,” I said. “First, ‘In Munch’s sight.’ What is Munch looking at...?” I picked up a book about paintings from the resources that were provided. Kura had this book too—it was a pretty interesting one about the hidden stories behind paintings. I flipped through the book, thinking there might be a story behind Munch’s *The Scream*. I found the page right away and focused on the text:

Edvard Munch

The Scream

Many people mistakenly believe that the person in this painting is screaming, but this is not true. He is actually covering his ears. In that case, what is he hearing that’s making him cover his ears? Munch wrote the following diary entry about a real experience that he had:

“I was walking on a road with two friends, and the sun was setting. Suddenly, the sky turned blood red. I stopped, feeling extremely tired, and leaned on the fence. It was as if blood and tongues of fire were hanging over the blue-black fjord. My friends continued walking, but I stood there trembling with anxiety. It was then that I heard an infinite scream piercing through nature.”

So, *The Scream* depicts a man covering his ears upon sensing nature’s loud scream.

I exchanged looks with Akihito. *In other words, Munch was looking at the sunset!*

“W-Wait, does that mean there’s something on the west side of this house?” Akihito looked around the room.

“N-No, that’s not it. Remember the four paintings they put up for this party—Mucha’s?” I was referring to the series of lithographs that depicted four times of day.

“O-Oh, the evening painting!”

I nodded and went back towards the party hall. But, well...figuring out this much must've been easy, because all of the guests were already standing in front of the *Evening Reverie* lithograph with their slips of paper. They had puzzled looks on their faces.

The next line was...“The maiden’s time of embrace.”

Everyone was staring at the painting and mumbling to themselves.

“Maiden’s embrace, huh?”

“What’s that mean?”

“Is there a secret behind that painting?”

I looked at *Evening Reverie* too. The woman was resting her chin on her right hand. It seemed like she was gazing out the window, possibly at the sunset sky, or possibly at nothing... The word “reverie” was a perfect fit. It felt like she was daydreaming about something on a quiet evening. *There must be a hint in here.*

While everyone was gulping and straining their eyes to find the clue, Akihito was staring at the riddle and frowning. “Hey, Aoi,” he said.

“Yes?”

“When it says ‘time of embrace,’ does that mean duration?” He pointed at the word “time.”

“What?” Exasperated, I stopped what I was doing. “Why would you think that? It’s obviously...” *Wait, I’d automatically assumed that it was referring to time of day, but that’s not necessarily the case. It could very well be “duration,” like Akihito said. What did Holmes mean by “time”? Is that the key to this riddle?*

“The maiden’s time of embrace”

First of all, what is the maiden embracing?

...A reverie. Is there something that represents a time of reverie?

“What would a time of reverie be?” I murmured to myself.

Rei, who was nearby, widened her eyes at me. “Could it be Debussy?”

I looked up at her, surprised. “Debussy?”

“Yes—the length of Debussy’s *Rêverie*!”

Everyone gasped and pulled out their smartphones at once.

“Oops, I said that too loudly.” Rei slumped her shoulders. *Well, it was also my fault for talking out loud without thinking.*

In the corner of my eye, I saw Holmes chuckle as he watched us.

“Aoi, it says that Debussy’s *Rêverie* is about four minutes long,” Akihito whispered to me, holding his phone. *I’m glad he’s being discreet, but...everyone here already figured that out.*

Assuming that the maiden’s time of embrace is “four minutes”... Well, I don’t know what that means either, but let’s look at the third line.

“The small country’s people whisper that I spin around”

At a glance, I still didn’t know what it meant.

“Hey, what’s something that spins around?” Akihito whispered in my ear.

“Something that spins around...” *Right, I’m sure it’s just referring to something that spins. Is there anything on the first floor that spins?* I looked around the party hall.

“Oh!” Akihito said quietly. He grabbed my hand and pulled me along. “I figured it out, Aoi. It’s *that*,” he whispered closely into my ear.

Holmes walked up to us and forcefully grabbed Akihito’s shoulder. “Akihito, don’t you think you’re overly close to Aoi?”

“O-Ow! Wh-What else am I supposed to do? We can’t let anyone else hear our discussions.”

“To me, it looks like you’re using that as an excuse to be more intimate than necessary. Your sexual harassment is quite troubling.”

“Wh-What? Dude, it’s not like that. Where’d you even get that idea from?”

“If that’s the case, then all right. My apologies. Please enjoy the rest of the game.” Holmes let go of Akihito’s shoulder and bowed.

“The heck is with him?” Akihito said to me. “Does he think he’s your guardian?” He clicked his tongue. Then, while warily keeping an eye on Holmes, he leaned in to whisper, “Anyway, don’t you think that wall clock is fishy?”

“Wall clock?” I followed his eyes and saw the antique decoration that looked like a wall clock at first glance. “Oh, that’s not a clock. I think it’s something like a music box.” The moment I said that, I widened my eyes. Behind the glass door was a large disc above some small dolls and animals. *Th-This is it!*

Akihito and I exchanged looks and nodded at each other. We ran to the music box before anyone else noticed.

“Uhh, how do you spin this thing?” Akihito peered around the large music box, which was about as tall as he was.

“I’ll start it for you,” Holmes said. He quickly walked over and activated it. When the disc began spinning, the clear, high-pitched tones echoed through the hall—much louder than I’d expected. Everyone quickly turned to look at us. The dolls below the disc were rotating like a merry-go-round.

“It’s so pretty,” I murmured. “I’ve heard this song somewhere before.”

Holmes nodded lightly. “It’s called *Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion*. This disc-playing music box was built by the Polyphon company in the nineteenth century. It’s made out of oak and walnut veneer. The dancing ceramic dolls haven’t been seen anywhere else, so they were likely specially commissioned by a wealthy person. This is another one of my grandfather’s treasures.”

The music lasted about two minutes. Nothing happened. Akihito and I exchanged glances again.

“U-Um, Holmes, can we inspect this music box?” I asked.

“Yes, as long as you’re gentle with it. Don’t pull on anything too hard.”

Having gained permission, we opened the glass door with a *clack*. The disc looked like a compass. I noticed a small box in the middle of the dolls that had been circling around and gasped—as did the other guests who’d gathered behind us. They stared at the music box, holding their breaths.

“A-Are you ready?” Akihito asked. I nodded firmly. It was a navy blue velvet

box, the kind you'd expect to see a ring in. Akihito picked it up and gently opened it.

Inside...was not a golden key.

"Sorry, this isn't it. Better luck next time☆"

It was Holmes's "wrong answer" card. The message felt mildly irritating for some reason.

Akihito and I were both lost for words. Behind us, the guests all burst out laughing.

Kisuke put his hand on Akihito's shoulder and said, "Sorry, Akihito. I figured it out."

"Huh?"

"I know what 'The small country's people whisper that I spin around' means. If it's on the first floor...then it has to be *this*." Kisuke walked so confidently across the hall that it was hard to believe he'd injured his leg a month ago. He placed his hand on the globe near the bay window. "I believe it's referring to this."

The design of the antique globe was completely different from the one my family had at home. It was sepia-colored and the country names were written in English. It looked like a stylish, retro decoration rather than a teaching tool.

"Oh!" everyone exclaimed.

Rei clapped her hands, her eyes gleaming. "You're right! The countries on this little globe are very small, and it spins!"

I nodded in agreement. It really could be the right answer. *Darn. It makes so much sense now that they've said it, but I hadn't thought of it at all.*

"I've actually seen a similar one at a friend's house before. This globe isn't just a globe—it's a container. Watch this..." Kisuke opened up the globe with a *pop*.

"Ohhh!" Everyone—including me—was surprised. The globe really was a container, even though it wasn't obvious at first glance. The inside seemed to be lined with gold leaf. It was like a secret compartment.

Kisuke took a small red box out of the globe.

“Damn, we lost to Kisuke?!” Akihito clenched his fists and ground his teeth in frustration.

“Sorry, Akihito, the treasure’s mine.” Kisuke smiled proudly and opened the box. Inside was...

“Nope, not here. Too bad for you♪”

Another “wrong answer” card from Holmes. This one felt even more annoying than the last one.

“What...?” Kisuke stood stock still. His gloating face instantly went pale. I felt bad, but I couldn’t help but laugh with everyone else.

Everyone’s eyes naturally turned to Holmes as we laughed. We all looked at him as if asking for help.

Holmes chuckled, picked up his riddle, and held it in front of us. “There’s no need to overcomplicate it. Please think about the direct meaning of the words. And make sure to read all the way to the end.”

Everyone looked at their papers again. I quietly read the riddle aloud: “In Munch’s sight, the maiden’s time of embrace, the small country’s people whisper that I spin around. The key you search for does not travel—it merely waits for you there.”

The first line was “In Munch’s sight.” We thought it referred to evening—Mucha’s lithograph *Evening Reverie*.

The second line was “The maiden’s time of embrace.” We assumed it referred to the length of *Rêverie*—four minutes.

The next lines said, “The small country’s people whisper that I spin around. The key you search for does not travel—it merely waits for you there.” We still didn’t know what it meant. Holmes said, “There’s no need to overcomplicate it. Please think about the direct meaning of the words.”

The small country’s people... What is the small country? The smallest country in the world is...the Vatican. I gasped and looked up. *That has to be it. In other words, the people in the Vatican whisper that “I spin around.” I spin around...?*

“Hahaha!” came a voice out of nowhere. “Sorry I’m late. I figured it out.”

I felt like I’d heard that voice somewhere before. We all looked towards it, confused. Standing there was a person who clearly looked like a young Buddhist priest with his ink black kimono and shaved head. He had a bold smirk on his face.

“E-Ensho?” I goggled at him. In the corner of my eye, I saw that Holmes had the same surprised expression as me, and Akihito had gone pale. Everyone else looked confused since they didn’t know who he was. *Why is Ensho here?* Seeing his amused smile put me in a cold sweat.

Ensho sneered at us and laughed. “Don’t make that face. I didn’t sneak in here—I got proper permission from Mr. Yagashira. Went and asked if I could join in on the fun when I heard about the party. This auntie over here let me in just now too.” He looked at Yoshie.

Yoshie slumped her shoulders and crossed her arms at being called “this auntie.” The owner had a slightly amused smile on his face but didn’t say anything.

“Now what brings you here?” Holmes asked in a chilly Kyoto accent. The icy aura he now gave off was the complete opposite of his demeanor just moments ago. I felt the peaceful party hall quickly growing colder.

“More importantly, lemme continue the treasure hunt.” Ensho continued to grin as he walked towards the bay window where the tin model cars were lined up. He picked up a specific one without hesitation, opened the door, and reached inside with his long fingers. “Bingo.” He smirked, holding a golden key.

“Ohhh!” The crowd roared.

“Wait, but why was it in that car?” Rei asked, tilting her head while clapping her hands.

Ensho grinned. “‘The small country’s people whisper that I spin around.’ The small country is the Vatican. The Holy See’s official language is Latin, and ‘I spin around’ refers to ‘volvo’—the Latin word for ‘I roll.’ Then if you take the length of *Rêverie* and convert it to seconds...”

“Oh!” the men shouted.

“Volvo 240!”

“So it was the Volvo 240!”

I knew nothing about Latin or cars, but I’d seen the label “Volvo 240” on one of the model cars. *So those labels were clues all along.* The key was inside the car, hence why the text mentioned traveling and waiting for us.

“I got my hopes up for your puzzle, Mr. Holmes,” Ensho said. “But it was too easy. What a letdown.”

“My apologies. If I’d known you were coming, I would’ve prepared one tailored for you. Anyway, you’re quite a cute child, coming in late and grabbing the best part for yourself.”

“Thanks.”

They looked each other in the eye and chuckled.

Rei was a bit distressed as she watched them from afar. “D-Do they not get along? Even though they’re both smiling, it’s terrifying.”

“Th-This goes beyond ‘not getting along,’ Rei,” Akihito whispered to her. He knew the situation between them well, so his expression was stiff.

“Well, it’s true that I was late,” Ensho said. “I’ll give the key to the young lady.” He placed the gold key on the table in front of me and turned to face Holmes. “Now, now, no need to be on edge. It’s a party! I’ve brought my own entertainment for us too.”

“Entertainment...?” Holmes asked.

“Uh huh.” Ensho nodded and picked up a large bag that had been left against the wall. He took out two wooden boxes, two hanging scrolls, a hammer, and a very thin knife, and laid them out. “This is an authenticity game between you and me, Mr. Holmes.” He stared straight at Holmes.

“Very well.” Holmes nodded with a stare that was just as sharp. Everyone in the hall gulped. “So what are the hammer and knife for? Might I employ these to beat your head in?”

“Now that’s scary—I don’t doubt you would, though. Instead, if you think something’s a fake, I want you to use these to break it immediately.”

“That’s a good idea. Being able to destroy it will keep the stress at bay.”

“Right?”

They looked at each other and smiled in the same way. The calm yet tense atmosphere rendered everyone else speechless. We watched them intently.

Ensho first picked up the two wooden boxes and took out the tea bowls that were inside. He placed them in the center of the table. The two black half-cylindrical tea bowls looked identical at first glance.

“Are those *raku* tea bowls?” Yoneyama murmured.

They did look like *raku* tea bowls. Holmes had taught me about them before. *Raku* ware dates back to the Momoyama period. In the sixteenth century, the founding father of the *Raku* family, Chojiro, produced them based on the three-colored pottery from China’s Ming dynasty. They were made to the liking of Sen no Rikyu, a Japanese tea master. Since they were handcrafted, they are valued for their thickness and slight deformations.

“Figure out which one’s real and smash the fake, will you?” Ensho grinned and handed Holmes the hammer.

Holmes silently took it and stared at the two tea bowls.

“Damn, they look exactly the same,” mumbled Ueda, who was standing behind me. Sadly, my eyes couldn’t tell the difference either. *They probably look different to Holmes and the owner, right?*

Holmes’s expression remained cold as he brought the hammer down on the one on the right without hesitation. The tea bowl broke cleanly in half. *So the one on the right was the fake!* Everyone gasped. Then, Holmes brought the hammer down on the left tea bowl as well.

“Unfortunately, both of them are fake,” he said. “It appears that you tried to imitate the style of Keinyu from the eleventh generation of the *Raku* family. You got close, but not all the way there. Keinyu was highly skilled and cultured—the tea bowls he created showed dignity and grace. I didn’t sense any of that from these.” He pointed at the broken tea bowls and smiled.

“Darn, I thought you’d fall for it if there were two.”

“I got my hopes up for your counterfeits, but it was too easy. What a letdown,” Holmes said, parroting what Ensho had said earlier.

Ensho narrowed his eyes in amusement. “As determined as ever, I see. How ‘bout this one, then?” He picked up one of the hanging scrolls and unrolled it. It was a two-character calligraphy along with the writer’s name. I couldn’t read what the intense, twisting characters said.

“H-Hey, what does that say?” Akihito asked quietly to no one in particular.

The manager answered softly, “The characters mean ‘purity and impurity,’ and the writer’s name is Tesshu Yamaoka.”

“Tesshu Yamaoka?”

“Yes, he was a shogunate retainer from the Bakumatsu period until the Meiji period, as well as a royal official and a thinker,” the manager answered smoothly. As a history novelist, he certainly was knowledgeable. Impressed, I looked back at the calligraphy.

Holmes sighed and crossed his arms. “Purity and impurity? Another unpleasant word choice from you, I see.”

Akihito tilted his head as if asking, “What does he mean by that?”

The manager explained quietly again, “There’s a saying that goes, ‘an ocean drinks both clear and muddy water’—the sea refuses no rivers. It means to be broadminded and accept both good and evil without discriminating.” Everyone nodded in understanding.

Holmes sighed lightly and picked up the knife. “They’re well written, but your nature shows through here and here,” he said, pointing at the characters with the knife before slicing the scroll apart. Apparently this one was a fake too.

“Gee, are they all fake?” Akihito said in a disappointed tone.

Ensho chuckled. “Be patient. There’s only one more to go.” He picked up the last hanging scroll and slowly opened it. It was an ukiyo-e of a kabuki actor holding the hilt of a sword. The moment I set eyes on it, it felt like an electric current ran through my body. *Is it because I’m an amateur...?* The painting’s intensity made me hold my breath.

“Sharaku!” Ueda exclaimed from behind me. *He likes ukiyo-e, so he must’ve recognized it.*

“Y-Yes, this is Omezo Ichikawa,” Kisuke continued, nodding. Apparently that was the name of the person in the painting. As a kabuki actor, Kisuke must’ve recognized it too.

“Yep, here we’ve got a hand-painted Sharaku ukiyo-e.” Ensho grinned confidently at Holmes.

Holmes stared at the hanging scroll with a serious expression. Behind us, the owner was watching him with crossed arms. His face was expressionless—I couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

A hand-painted Sharaku ukiyo-e... I recalled what Holmes had said before:

“Hand-painted ukiyo-e are one of a kind—they aren’t prints. They would be incredibly valuable nowadays.

“It was said that Sharaku’s original paintings had all been destroyed in a great earthquake, but a family of noble descent who called themselves Shunpoan revealed that they were in possession of them. A renowned appraiser named Professor Rinpu Sasagawa determined that the paintings were genuine, and it was considered the discovery of the century. They would’ve been worth the equivalent of hundreds of millions of yen.

“However, it was later found that they were all counterfeits that had been forged by a certain nefarious group. The professor’s reputation hit rock bottom...”

There weren’t supposed to be any original Sharaku paintings left in the world. The original Sharaku painting on a folding fan that was discovered recently in Greece was considered a miracle. *So it shouldn’t be possible for this to be real, but...what’s with this intensity? Is it really possible for a counterfeit to feel like this? An original Sharaku painting had been found somewhere in the world, so you can no longer say for sure that it’s impossible.*

Holmes silently stared at the ukiyo-e for some time before gently picking up the knife. We all exchanged glances with each other, holding our breaths. Holmes then strengthened his grip on the knife and slashed the hanging scroll

with great force. The two halves floated to the ground.

Ensho snorted. “Too bad. That was real.” He stared at Holmes, his mouth twisting into a smile as if he couldn’t hide his delight.

Holmes’s eyebrow twitched. Everyone put their hands to their mouths, shocked speechless.

“Your knowledge and preconceptions got in the way, eh? The Shunpoan incident *was* the work of a nefarious group, but there actually was a noble family that had real Sharaku paintings. The trouble came about when some of them wanted to claim them for themselves. There’s a lot of things that happen in the world that never come to light... What you just slashed was a genuine Sharaku original painting,” Ensho said, seeming truly sad. He looked down at the ukiyo-e on the floor and stepped on it. “Well, either way, it’s not like I care.” He twisted his foot, crumpling the ukiyo-e.

Holmes said nothing.

This was real? Ensho said he didn’t care, but even I know how much a mystical original painting by Sharaku would be worth. It would be insane.

Silence took over the hall. Ensho smirked for a second before bursting out into laughter. “Hahaha! It was all a big lie.”

“Wh-What?” Akihito and I asked in unison. Everyone was bewildered.

“This is a real deal counterfeit painted by yours truly. I know what you were thinking just now, Mr. Holmes: ‘Oh no, how could I have cut up a real Sharaku painting?’ The way your face stiffened when I said it was real was glorious. Absolutely adorable.” He laughed and grabbed Holmes by the chin. “You really believed me, right? C’mon, let me hear it from your own mouth.”

Holmes expressionlessly grabbed Ensho’s wrist and twisted it. Ensho gasped and his face contorted in pain. Upon seeing that, Holmes’s face relaxed into a smile and he twisted even harder. “I think it’d be a good idea to break this annoying right hand.”

Ensho clicked his tongue and pushed Holmes away. “Violent as ever, I see. You really were trying to break it, eh?” He rubbed his right arm.

“Of course not. Breaking your arm right here wouldn’t satisfy me. What I actually wanted to do was drag you to the police by that annoying hand.”

“Go ahead and try.” Ensho immediately held out his right hand.

Holmes paused. “Well, I suppose you’d be able to escape. Ideally I’d have you turn yourself in.”

“Ah well, guess we’ll call it a draw this time. I ain’t gonna atone for my crimes ‘til I’ve completely bested you. If you kneel on the ground and tell me you’ll quit being an appraiser, then maybe I’ll feel satisfied enough to turn myself in.”

“No, *I’m* going to completely best *you* until you give up on making counterfeits and turn yourself in.”

“Big talk for someone who got upset over a Sharaku counterfeit!”

“Oh? Do you really think this was a draw?” Holmes smiled, his eyes narrowing into slits.

Ensho frowned. “What was the clincher, then?” He crossed his arms and stared at Holmes.

Holmes wordlessly pointed at his own ear.

Ensho’s eyes widened. “Haha!” he laughed, before murmuring weakly, “So it was the ear...”

“Out of curiosity, why did you choose Sharaku for this match?”

“Why...?”

“Was it the cry of your heart? Did you want me to hear it? You really are like a young child on the inside. Absolutely adorable,” Holmes said, all smiles.

Ensho stared at him. “You really are”—he grabbed Holmes by the collar—“an annoying lad.”

Everyone went pale with shock, but Holmes seemed unperturbed. He grabbed Ensho’s collar back and said, “You don’t have to act immature just because I’m right.”

They both put more force into their hands as if trying to strangle each other. Everyone else was frozen in place.

My knees were trembling with fear too, but before I knew it, I'd run in between them, shouting, "S-Stop!"

Surprised by my sudden interruption, they let go of each other and looked at me.

"W-We're in the middle of a party," I continued. "Cut it out, both of you!"

"Aoi..." Holmes said.

"The authenticity game is over, right? This is the end of that, then. Ensho, please clean up your things!" I shouted, so nervous that I had no idea what I was saying.

The hall fell silent. Everyone stood stock still as if taken aback.

Ensho gaped at me before bursting out into laughter. "Fair enough. The party game's over, so I gotta clean up. You're right, little miss." He chuckled and picked up the hanging scroll from the floor. He then glared at Holmes and said, "Remember this, Mr. Holmes: I hate your guts, to the point where I wanna tear you to shreds. Just you watch—I'll break you down next time."

"What a coincidence—I was thinking the same thing."

The two of them continued to smile at each other, openly expressing their dark inner feelings. The rest of us watched over them, too overwhelmed to say anything.

6

Ensho disappeared after that, leaving the party in an awkward mood. However, Yoshie smiled brightly, clapped her hands, and said, "Now that the game's over, shall we have dessert?" On cue, various small cakes and desserts were brought in. The party instantly returned to its cheerful atmosphere. There were sofas in the hall, and the staff dimmed the lights a bit and started playing jazz music.

The guests were talking excitedly about what had just happened.

"That match was a real sight to see, huh?"

“Who was that?”

“What was the owner’s prize, anyway?”

“Kiyotaka chose the prize. It’s a Bianchi road bike.”

“Ah, that’s nice. If I’d known the prize would be so good, I wouldn’t have accepted the job of monitor.”

“There’s also a sales catalog from a noble family.”

“I’ll pass on that...”

Everything was back to normal. Suddenly, I noticed that Holmes was nowhere to be found. I looked around the party hall, wondering if he’d gone out to the balcony. I went to the window and looked outside, but was interrupted by Ueda calling out to me from behind.

“Yes?” I turned around.

“Thanks for doing that.”

“Huh?”

“It should’ve been me or Takeshi that stopped ’em, but for some reason, we could only watch. It was a relief that you went in,” he said with a light chuckle.

I shook my head and said, “It was no big deal.” I smiled back at him. “You really are like Holmes’s second dad though, thanking me for that.”

“I guess I am. I don’t got kids of my own, but he’s special.”

“He’s your best friend’s son, after all.”

Ueda sighed. “It’s strange. Even though he’s not my kid, he still feels special ’cause he’s the kid of the woman I loved,” he mumbled as if to himself.

I blinked. “Huh?”

“This is just between you and me. When I was young, I had a crush on Takeshi’s girlfriend.”

I nodded, dumbfounded. I was lost for words at this unexpected story.

“’Tis a bittersweet memory from my bachelor days, but I remember it like it was yesterday. I hid my feelings and congratulated them when they got

married. I was shocked when she got pregnant, but when Kiyotaka was born, I cried true tears of happiness. She really left us too soon...”

My chest ached at the sorrow in his eyes. *Ueda had hidden feelings for his best friend's wife... Maybe he felt conflicted because they loved the same woman, and that has something to do with why he's trying so hard to get the manager to remarry.*

“So, Kiyotaka’s special to me.”

He must care about Holmes a lot because of his feelings for Holmes’s mother.

“As you can see, he’s a real oddball, but stay friends with him, all right?” Ueda grinned.

“O-Okay.” I nodded.

While I was absentmindedly watching Ueda walk away, Akihito approached me and said, “Hey, where’d Holmes go?”

“I-I’m not sure. I was about to look for him too.”

“He’s got a moody side to him, so he might be bashing his head against a wall right now.”

“N-No, I don’t think so...”

We left the party hall in search of Holmes. I noticed an open door at the back of the entrance hall and quickly walked over. The lights weren’t on in the room, so it was only lit by moonlight. Holmes was standing at the window.

“S-See, I told you he was moody.” Akihito shivered.

“H-Holmes?” I called out timidly.

Holmes slowly turned around. “Oh, it’s you two. Did something happen?”

“We didn’t see you, so...” I was worried that he might’ve been depressed from what happened during the competition.

“You were worried, right?” He looked down at me with gentle eyes.

I nodded.

“I was reflecting by myself, since you scolded me.”

"I-I didn't mean to. Sorry, my mind went blank, and I jumped in without thinking." I hurriedly bowed.

Akihito laughed. "I thought for sure you were gonna say, 'Get your hands off of Holmes!' but instead you said, 'Cut it out, both of you!'"

That was so embarrassing. "B-But both of you were at fault, right?" I asked, shrinking back.

Holmes nodded. "Yes, you're right. Thank you. It's because of you that we both calmed down."

Akihito's eyes widened. "Both of you?"

"Yes. As much as I hate to admit it, he and I are similar. Just like how two of the same magnetic poles will repel each other, he and I will always overreact when we run into each other. Aoi's scolding cooled my head a bit."

They're completely different, yet similar. Perhaps they're a pair of opposites, like light and shadow...

"So that got you feeling moody, and you were reflecting on yourself in a dark, moody room? Man, that's so gloomy."

"No, I was just admiring the moon while listening for the New Year's Eve bells."

"Huh? It's not that late, is it?" Akihito looked down at his watch.

"Chion-in Temple starts their one-hundred-and-eight rings at 10:30, so it's already begun. Oh right, would you like to do the first shrine visit of the year now?"

"Right now?"

"It's a bit of a walk, but I think if we head to the Gion one now, we'll arrive just in time."

We nodded eagerly at his suggestion.

"Y-Yes, let's go!"

"Yeah!"

"By the way, which shrine is 'the Gion one'?" I asked.

“It’s Yasaka Shrine,” Holmes answered. “It’s in Gion and used to be called Gion Shrine, so many people still call it that.”

“Oh yeah, they do,” Akihito said.

We put on our coats and left the Yagashira house.

“Brr!” The cold air permeated my body. But...

“Let’s go.” Holmes’s refreshing smile made me feel truly relieved.

“Man, I thought you’d be more depressed. Are you faking it?” Akihito asked rudely.

Holmes smiled cheerfully. “No, I feel much better than I did last time.”

“Huh?” Akihito and I both blinked in surprise.

“The Sharaku counterfeit was painted astonishingly well. It wasn’t even comparable to the previous items or the Zuiryu calligraphy at Nanzen-ji Temple. He must’ve embodied Sharaku to an incredible extent.”

Akihito and I nodded.

“He also has an exceptional talent for paintings above all else. His Hunt counterfeit was captivating too, and the ukiyo-e painting this time radiated the intensity of a genuine article. To be honest, I faltered for a second. Genuine Sharaku paintings shouldn’t exist, but the work was so compelling that I entertained the possibility that one could’ve been discovered somewhere. It was *only* for a second, though,” he emphasized. “However, I quickly found a difference.”

“Really?” Akihito asked.

“Yes, because the owner and I went to see the hand-painted folding fan that was found in Greece.”

I leaned in and asked, “Was the difference the ear, like Ensho said?”

Holmes nodded. “Yes, it was.”

“Come to think of it, this isn’t the first time you’ve said something about ears,” Akihito said. “Do you have an ear fetish?”

“No, but Sharaku had a habit of drawing ears with five lines.”

“Ensho didn’t?”

“Ensho used the same five lines, but in his case, I could tell that it was done consciously rather than as a habit.”

“So from the ear, you could tell that it was drawn by Ensho himself?” I asked.

Holmes nodded and said, “Yes.”

Even though Ensho was in a trancelike state, having “become” Sharaku, he put extra effort into the ear, which was one of Sharaku’s characteristic areas. Holmes had picked up on that.

“That said, he was right that I *was* shaken for a split second when he said it was real. So I don’t see it as a complete victory.” Holmes smiled bitterly.

Akihito burst out laughing. “Yeah, you totally froze up.”

“Yes, that is my only regret.”

In their last clash, Holmes had technically won, but he was frustrated because he was unsatisfied with the way he did so. This time, Ensho declared it a draw, but Holmes believed that he had won. *Maybe Ensho’s the one who’s frustrated now.*

“But most importantly, I don’t think I could’ve possibly cut it up like that if it were real,” Holmes murmured with a gentle smile.

Akihito tilted his head, apparently not understanding what Holmes meant by that. He put his hands on the back of his head as he walked.

I think I know what Holmes is saying. Holmes judged it to be a counterfeit, and when he picked up the knife, he must’ve left the final decision to his own instincts. If he tried to cut it but stopped at the last second, then that would mean his body and soul recognized it as genuine...but he did manage to cut it. In other words, his body and soul decided that it was fake.

In fact, there was something that Holmes couldn’t cut: the folding fan that Ensho had written on... Emotionally, he wanted to cut it apart and throw it away. But he couldn’t. It was because the painting that Ensho had poured his own soul into without imitating anyone else was art, without a doubt. That’s what I learned from that fan. Those two really are fated to clash...

“You asked him if he chose Sharaku because it was the cry of his heart—what was that about?” I asked quietly.

Holmes smiled awkwardly. Judging from his expression, I could kind of tell that he was embarrassed about that immature outburst.

“Do you remember what I said about Sharaku being a mysterious artist?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Mysterious artist?” Akihito tilted his head.

“He appeared out of nowhere and then disappeared after ten months,” I explained. “His identity was unknown, but the leading theory is that he was a Noh actor, right?”

“Yes, the Noh actor named Jurobei Saito.”

“Noh actors weren’t allowed to have secondary jobs, so he kept it a secret, right?” I asked.

Holmes nodded. “That prohibition was completely different from how it is today. There was no telling what the consequences would’ve been. So, Sharaku hid his identity, gambling with his life in order to paint. Do you know what that means?” He looked at me and Akihito, and we gulped.

“That’s how badly he wanted to paint, right?” I asked.

“Yes, I believe so. He couldn’t hold back his instinct as an artist—the desire to paint. Then, as his paintings became more and more popular in society, it became even more impossible for Jurobei Saito to reveal that he was Sharaku. He enjoyed it at first, but the longer he hid it, the more painful it became. He wanted to declare that he was the one who painted those paintings. I felt an overlap between Sharaku’s hidden feelings and Ensho’s feelings as a counterfeiter who could never go public with his work.”

The painful feelings of wanting to be seen... Judging from Ensho’s outrage, Holmes must’ve struck a nerve when he said that.

“I see,” Akihito said beside me, hands still behind his head. “He should just quit counterfeiting like Yoneyama did, then.”

Holmes chuckled lightly. “Indeed. I understand how he feels, though...” His voice dropped to a murmur for his next words. “He can’t give up just yet.”

7

It was supposed to be a thirty-minute walk from the Philosopher’s Walk to Yasaka Shrine, but since we were talking and laughing about various things, it felt like much less time had passed when I spotted the shrine’s two-storied gate. The illuminated vermilion gate seemed to be floating in the darkness of night. The row of paper lanterns continued to the west, where the Gion shopping district was bustling with people. I noticed this during the Gion Festival too—it was a very Japanese scene, and yet it all felt magical, as though I’d wandered into another world. I stared at it in awe.

Holmes peered into my face. “Are you surprised by how many people there are?”

“This is normal for New Year’s Eve,” Akihito said. “I bet Meiji Shrine’s even worse, right?”

“Y-Yes, I expected it to be crowded since it’s New Year’s Eve. It’s just that this scenery feels strange and magical to me since I grew up in Kanto... I’m glad that these historical sights are still around even though generations have passed. It might be selfish of me, but I want Kyoto to stay as much an old city as possible,” I whispered, gazing at the vermilion gate and the streets of Gion. *It feels like a miracle that all of these ancient things are still here today...*

“I agree,” Holmes said. “I think that Kyoto allowed Tokyo to be the new capital precisely because it wanted to protect its history.”

Kyoto “allowed” Tokyo to be the new capital? I almost burst out laughing at how typically “Kyoto” that phrasing was. *He’s right, though. If Kyoto stayed the capital, it would’ve had to globalize to follow the rest of the world. Skyscrapers would’ve been built; temples and shrines would’ve been pushed to the side... It never would’ve been able to stay the way it is now. Maybe the gods dwelling in the shrines and temples here relinquished the capital in order to protect this land,* I thought, influenced by the mystical scenery before my eyes.

I heard the gong of a bell come from far away. It wasn't the bell at Chion-in Temple.

"That's Nanzen-ji Temple's bell," Holmes explained.

"You can hear theirs from here too, huh?" Akihito asked.

"The faint bells coming from different directions make for a nice atmosphere," I remarked.

We merged into the crowd of people entering Yasaka Shrine.

"Yasaka Shrine really is popular," I said. "Look at all of these people!"

"Yes, I usually don't come here during New Year's," Holmes replied.

"Yeah, all of the locals avoid it," Akihito added.

"Really?" I asked.

"Yes, but I think everyone should visit at least once," Holmes said. "I wanted you to experience the *okera mairi*, Aoi." He looked at a lantern in the shrine grounds that was lit with a bonfire. There was an even bigger crowd of people surrounding it. Next to the lantern was a sign that said "Okera Fire." The people were holding things that looked like ropes and lighting them with the fire.

"What's *okera mairi*...?" I asked.

"Okera is a medicinal herb. In this tradition, okera roots are burned and visitors light those good fortune ropes with the fire and bring them home. The flame can be transferred to a candle in a household shrine or used to boil soup. It's a prayer for good health. Also, even if the flame goes out, the rope becomes a protective charm. Additionally, the ropes are only distributed from 7 p.m. on New Year's Eve until 5 a.m. on New Year's Day."

"W-Wow, I didn't know there were traditions exclusive to New Year's Eve." Lighting ropes on fire seemed dangerous, but upon closer examination, I saw that it was only the tips of the ropes that glowed red—like when you light incense sticks. Many people were rotating the tips so that the flame wouldn't go out.

"It seems kinda dangerous though," Akihito said.

“Yes, so please be careful.”

When we finally reached the bell, we gave our offerings and clapped our hands together. I mentally gave thanks for the year. *A lot happened, but it was a great year. I'm really thankful...*

After giving thanks, we left the line of people. The three of us looked at each other and bowed, saying “Happy new year.”

“Here’s to another year!”

“Well, don’t get too ahead of yourself.”

“C’mon, don’t make that the first thing you say to me this year. By the way, my New Year’s resolution is to work hard in both my public and private life.”

“That’s a good goal for you. What’s yours, Aoi?”

I hesitated at the sudden question. “M-My goal for the year? I haven’t thought about it yet... Oh right, I want to be able to drink coffee black.” I clenched my fists, determined.

Holmes and Akihito exchanged glances and laughed.

“Wait, why’re you laughing?”

“That’s not something you have to declare, right?” Akihito said.

“You’re trying to grow up, right?” Holmes said in a jokingly earnest tone, placing his hand on his chest as if touched.

I blushed. “I-I’m sorry my goal is just to grow up.”

“It’s fine. In that case...” Holmes walked over to where the staff were distributing ropes and came back with three of them. “Let’s get our okera flames and use them to make coffee. My family’s Yasaka apartment is close by.” He handed us the ropes.

“Oh, sure!” I agreed eagerly. “I’ve been wanting to see your Yasaka apartment.”

“Boiling water with the okera fire and using it to drink the first coffee of the new year? That sounds like it’ll bring good luck—and be delicious,” Akihito said.

“Yeah!”

Yasaka Shrine was getting more crowded by the minute. We received our flames and carefully walked through the shrine grounds.

“Let’s leave through the south gate,” Holmes said, leading us to the relatively less crowded entrance. Apparently the flashy vermilion gate that the shrine was known for was the west gate. In contrast, the south one was a simple *torii* gate made of stone.

“You take the south gate when you’re going to Kiyomizu-dera, right?” Akihito asked, looking up at it.

Holmes nodded. “Yes. The apartment where my father and I live is over there.” He pointed at a nearby building that was on the way to Kiyomizu-dera Temple. It had a modern-looking, dark brown exterior that seemed to be made of brick. Its calm ambiance blended in with the surrounding scenery.

“Huh, it’s not new, but it looks like a nice building,” Akihito remarked. “You can see Yasaka Tower from there, right?”

“Yes, my father is very proud of that. However, inside, it’s just an ordinary three-bedroom apartment.”

We walked to the apartment, rotating the ropes to keep the okera flames alive.

“Oh right, what’s your New Year’s resolution, Holmes?” I asked, realizing that he hadn’t told us yet.

Holmes stopped to think, a distant look in his eyes. “I was pathetic last year, so I want to do better this year,” he said quietly yet firmly.

He must be referring to Ensho. Akihito and I nodded in understanding.

The one-hundred-and-eight bells were still echoing across Gion’s sky. It was a gentle sound, as if they were accepting all of the feelings hidden in this floating world.

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Translator's Corner

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Thank you for reading Volume 3 of *Holmes of Kyoto*! I find it really neat how the prepubs for this series have matched up fairly closely with the real-world seasons. This is the section where I write about translation choices as well as cultural aspects that didn't get in-depth explanations in the novel.

In Chapter 2, Aoi mentions that her grandmother isn't home because she went on a trip for seniors to eat snow crab. Showing respect for the elderly is an important aspect of Japanese culture—there's even a public holiday dedicated to it in September. On Respect for the Aged Day, volunteers distribute free lunches to seniors and children put on shows. Even outside of the holiday, gatherings and events are held to honor the elderly, such as the one that Aoi's grandmother went to.

Chapter 3 marked the return of Ensho, the series' Moriarty equivalent. Last season I was watching a certain *Sherlock Holmes*-inspired anime told from the perspective of Moriarty. It just so happened that when I was translating Ensho's part, the episode that aired that week had Moriarty saying to Holmes, "Catch me if you can, Mr. Holmes"—in full English. I love that voice actor so I probably rewatched that scene at least ten times—but that got me thinking, *what does Moriarty call Holmes in the original novels?*

I looked it up and sure enough, it was "Mr. Holmes." You've probably noticed that most honorifics are omitted in this translation (with "sensei" being an exception), but in this case, I thought it'd be fitting to have Ensho call Holmes "Mr. Holmes" to give him some Moriarty flair.

A couple of other interesting tidbits:

Kura is located in the Teramachi-Sanjo shopping district, and Teramachi literally means "temple street." It's a name given to streets or towns with a significant temple presence. A quick count suggests that there are at least eight

temples (and three shrines) along Teramachi Street.

Japanese has several synonyms that mean “antique” and are used depending on the type of item. There’s an interesting line in Chapter 1 where Akihito comments on how Kura has things from both the East and the West. The word he uses for Eastern antiques is *kobijutsu* (lit. “old works of art”), and the word he uses for Western antiques is *antiiku*—a loanword from English (makes sense, right?). These words can be used interchangeably regardless of the item’s origin, but the latter certainly does have more of a Western feel from a Japanese perspective.

Editor's Corner

As we've mentioned in the notes for previous volumes, one thing we have to constantly negotiate in this series is how much the reader can be expected to know about obscure bits of Japanese culture. A lot of the time we're lucky because the detail is so obscure that even Japanese readers wouldn't be familiar with it, and neither would the characters, so Holmes does his job of explaining it to us. Other times it's easy to slip in a definition.

But sometimes we get stuck with a detail that's too obscure to leave alone, in a situation where it's too awkward to insert an explanation. We had one of those in this volume, when Holmes says that the size of a garden is twenty-four hectares and Aoi finds that hard to visualize:

"How big is twenty-four hectares anyway? I can't really imagine it."

"Hmm. People often use Tokyo Dome for scale, so around five of those?"

"To be honest, I can't really think in terms of Tokyo Dome either. How many tatami mats is that?"

"About a hundred and forty-four thousand."

"A hundred and..." Nope, no idea.

This very brief, slightly amusing little exchange was the source of much agonizing behind the scenes over units of measure.

Tokyo Dome is basically a conventional measure—the American equivalent would be saying how many football fields long something is—and it wasn't too hard to add "People often use Tokyo Dome for scale" for the reader who doesn't know that. But when Tokyo Dome didn't help, what Aoi asked in the original was actually "How many *tsubo*?"

Tsubo is a traditional unit of measure usually used for plots of land, so it makes sense for her to use it here. But adding yet another explanation in this quick back-and-forth exchange seemed like it would be too distracting. So we decided to replace the measurement with acres.

However... One of the interesting things about working for J-Novel Club is that we get feedback from readers as parts of the books are posted weekly. One reader found that this substitution itself was distracting. Would a teenage girl in Japan really think in terms of acres?

My initial alternative suggestion was that we use square kilometers, but when Minna did the math, she reported that 24 hectares is 0.24 square km, which made it seem like that answer didn't really add much, and would be uncharacteristically unhelpful for Holmes. Back to the drawing board.

There was of course another traditional unit of measure that would probably be familiar to our readers: tatami mats. I had resisted this because I suspected that the number of tatami mats would be ridiculously huge, and Minna again reported back: yeah, 144,000.

I'm pretty sure no one measures anything in tatami mats at that scale. On the other hand, the original number was 72,000 tsubo, and the point of the conversation seems to be that that's so large that it didn't help Aoi picture it either.

So I threw up my hands: maybe we're the first to ever measure anything in hundreds of thousands of tatami mats, but who says you can't? And while I don't know about you, after all that, I still have exactly zero mental image of how big that garden is—but neither does Aoi, so I guess that means we conveyed the right meaning in the end!



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Holmes of Kyoto: Volume 3

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